

HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from
WEST MICHIGAN
AVIATION ACADEMY

Fall/Winter 2025



“Everyone Is Here To Do Their Best”

Abram volunteered to capture beautiful drone footage of Gilda's Club West Side Walk.



If you ask a teacher what makes a great student, you'll probably hear about things like class participation and enthusiasm. According to Eric Fillinger, one of our aviation instructors, senior Abram Barker possesses these qualities in abundance.

“We have three pillars: safety first, professionalism, and the pursuit of excellence,” Eric notes. “Abram exemplifies all of these. He always creates a quality product. He’s

quick to volunteer, positive and upbeat. Abram is an ever-constant presence of reliability and excellence.”

Abram is a perfect example of how opportunities open up new horizons. “I came to WMAA thinking I wanted to be a pilot,” he says. “Then I took Intro to Engineering, and that sparked something in me. Now I plan to attend Michigan Tech and become a mechanical engineer.”

His love of aviation, however, did not fall by the wayside. Abram was the first in his class to earn his FAA Part 107 license last year, and now can pilot drones. He’s starting a business, and also volunteers his time for projects such as the Gilda’s Club West Side Walk, a community fundraiser for their grief and cancer program.

“There are so many opportunities at WMAA,” Abram says. “I love that you see people walking around with RC planes and 3D printers like it’s no big deal. I joined Weight Crew, which is not something I ever thought I would be doing! But I tried it, and found it was really welcoming. I have a lot of fun with the Sim Racing Club, where we bring RC steering wheels and race cars on screen. This is just a unique place where all these cool things can happen.”

Abram says that excellence matters to him. “I love the quality of the education I’m receiving. Everyone is professional, just like what you would find in the real world. Everyone is here to do their best. I feel like I’m being well prepared, not just for college but for life.”



15 Years of Taking Education to New Heights

Where We Started

"After running for Governor of Michigan in 2006, for the first time in many years, my calendar was wide open. I found myself asking, 'What's next?' It was Betsy who offered the spark that would change everything. She said, 'You've always loved aviation, and you care deeply about education—why not find a way to bring those passions together?'"

"That simple conversation led to the idea for West Michigan Aviation Academy.

"I've often said, 'The higher your altitude, the broader your horizon.' That's been my hope for every WMAA student—to give them the chance to rise higher, explore further, and see possibilities they might never have imagined. Watching this school soar and seeing the lives it has touched is one of the greatest joys of my life."

 **Dick DeVos, Founder and Board President, West Michigan Aviation Academy**

"I was doing the aviation legal work for Amway when Dick asked me to be on the WMAA board. As I sat in our first meeting, sipping coffee to warm my hands in a decrepit building with no heat, I was hopeful of what this could be. After Dick shared his great vision, wild horses could not have kept me away.

"We had modest hopes that first year. As our informational open house drew near, we thought an initial class of 35 freshman would be a great start. I was stunned as the cars started pouring in. Over time, we amended our charter from 60, to 80, to 135, and finally up to 155 students per grade level. That's when I knew we had something special."

 **Clifford Maine, WMAA Board Member**

"It took us a few years to figure out how to teach aviation to high school students. We started by sending them to Kent Aviation Center as an extracurricular option. Then we tried to run flight operations after school. We started teaching ground school and offering flight training as part of the curriculum in 2014. That's when the program began to hum.

"I grew up in the Marines, where 18-20 year olds were launching and maintaining my plane. I knew that with the right environment and training, WMAA students could do it, too. But not everyone was on board with having high school students actually fly. Without an aviation-centric board, none of this would have happened."

 **George Pavey, Dean of Aviation and Engineering**

2011-2012

First engineering and robotics classes offered

2013-2014

First 3 students earned private pilot licenses

2016-2017

WMAA achieved maximum enrollment of 620 students; #1 Best Charter High School in Michigan (Niche)

2010-2011

WMAA opened with 80 students

2012-2013

Acquired first plane; introduced incentive flights

2014-2015

Added Private Pilot Flight Training to curriculum

2018-2019

WMAA Foundation formed



Where We Are Now

"I came to WMAA as the second CEO in 2019. We entered our second decade with a true commitment to our mission and an unapologetic clarity about what we stand for and who we are. We have operationalized our mission and values as a guiding framework for the organization, allowing individuals to find their place within it and contribute in their own unique way."

"We are humbled by the community's love of WMAA, as evidenced by the fact that we receive far more applications than we have space available. Yet, we refuse to rest on our reputation. Every day, we push for excellence and embrace new ways to thrive together."

 **Nicole Gasper, CEO, WMAA**

"It's not popular in education today to set a high bar. It takes courage and intentionality to be different, and we have that. This is a place where old-fashioned values meet a cutting-edge educational environment. I'm proud that our culture has continued to thrive."

"I'm also very proud of what the Foundation has achieved. We now have a functional fundraising arm that engages donors to embrace the WMAA vision and support it. Our donor relationships and industry connections continue to grow deeper as we all become part of a community. I can't wait to see how our alumni relationships also start to blossom as our graduates hit their career stride and want to give back."

 **Terry Russell, Board President, WMAA Foundation**

Where We Are Going

"We have hired seven WMAA graduates. Some are pilots, some work in maintenance or other areas of the company."

"You can tell WMAA graduates by the way they present themselves. That's important in our industry, which is built on customer service. You see, it doesn't matter how many legs you've flown in one day, or how badly some of them might have gone. For the customer boarding the jetway, this is their first leg. We need to treat them that way. WMAA graduates know how to look people in the eye, shake hands, and be professional. They represent our company in the way that we want to be represented."

 **Jeff Gauger, Northern Jet**

"There is a crying need for technicians in our industry. Unfortunately, many young people don't want to, or know how to, work with their hands. WMAA students are different. They see and live aviation every day. When they decide to pursue a hands-on career, they already have experience."

"We have hired two WMAA graduates and the thing that stands out to me is their maturity. They have an underlying professionalism and know how to communicate with adults. These students come out after four years with a great platform they can use to succeed in any field. Fifteen years ago, this school was a test of an idea. Now it's a huge success and the secret is out."

 **Tim Brouwer, Mayday Avionics**

"After graduating from WMAA, I earned a degree in Aerospace Engineering from Western Michigan. Since then, I've landed on a dirt runway in a ghost town, been part of two space flights, and designed a 'black box' system for aircraft."

"WMAA set me up career-wise. Engineering allowed me to pay off my student loans, have some cool experiences, and learn from a ton of people who love small airplanes. Thanks to my engineering salary, I was also able to buy a 1946 Cessna 120. I've logged 500 hours in that plane, and it has fueled my true passion, which is to fly."

"Being a WMAA graduate allows me to explore virtually endless opportunities. I'm part of an amazing legacy and I want to see it grow."

 **Brian Erhart, Class of 2014**

2019-2020

Introduced Build-A-Plane Class and UAS ("drone") ground school

2021-2022

Flight Training Center opened; flight training scholarships introduced; VEX teams qualified for World Tournament

2025-2026

200th pilot will graduate

2020-2021

100th student earned a private pilot license

2024-2025

Freshman applications reached 200% of capacity



The Ripple Effect of Role Models

For most of the 20th century, the airlines had plenty of applicants, thanks to the male veterans who learned to fly in the armed forces. Stereotypes about male vs. female roles discouraged women from aviation, as did the high cost and lack of role models. As a result, only 5-8% of the pilots worldwide are female.

WMAA is working to change that.

Our aviation department encourages all young people who have interest and aptitude to pursue flight training. Approximately 18% of the 195 students who have earned a private pilot license since 2014 are female. Countless others have explored airplane maintenance, aviation engineering, unmanned aerial systems, and other aviation-related opportunities.

We asked some of our Lady Aviators — past and present — to share their thoughts about their experiences at WMAA and how it feels to have opportunities open up before them.



Shannon VanZegeren

Social Studies Teacher; Leader of Lady Aviators Club

"I came to WMAA as a student teacher, with a background in English and social studies. However, when a position opened up to teach Aviation History and Literature, I thought, 'Why not?'"

"You need to understand that aviation was foreign to me. I was an artsy type who played the harp and taught English! We had no aviators in my family. But curiosity got the better of me. I found myself hanging around the aviation department, soaking up as much as possible so I could teach better.

"George Pavey picked up on that interest and encouraged me to earn my private pilot license. I didn't really think much

about it...I just said yes. People around me were shocked because I didn't fit the preconceived mold of a pilot.

"Achieving this goal did not come naturally to me. So many times I asked myself, 'Who am I kidding?' During my struggle, I found a woman who is a professional harpist and also has her private pilot license. She inspired me to think, 'If she can do it, I can too.' And I did! I passed my FAA check ride in December of 2020.

"In my experience, the most powerful thing for a young girl to see is a woman older than her who has walked the road. I started the Lady Aviators Club as a way to show our young ladies that aviation is wide open to them. My goal is to get as many females from the aviation industry as possible in front of these girls. Someone will be empowered and go on to do things she never thought were possible."



Grace Eger
Class of 2021

"I started high school intending to be an engineer. I quickly realized my brain was not wired that way, so I started looking at other options.

"Students around me kept talking about aviation and how cool it was. I never, ever thought about aviation when I was growing up. It didn't seem like a career for a woman. But everyone at WMAA presented aviation as being open to everyone. That included Shannon VanZegeren, who was finishing up her work toward a private pilot license at the time I started.

"It was a huge benefit to have someone like Shannon to talk to during this time. I found myself looking at the guys who mysteriously knew things, like what a Phillips head screwdriver was, and being reluctant to ask questions because I thought I would sound stupid. But having Shannon available somehow made it okay to ask those questions.

"After I graduated from WMAA, I joined the West Michigan Flying Club to earn additional ratings. Now I am thrilled to be back at WMAA as a certified flight instructor. In that role, I'm trying to pass on confidence, especially to the young women. Since I graduated from WMAA, I've had experiences with flight instructors who are very knowledgeable but don't pay attention to their impact on the person they are instructing. I want the WMAA students I instruct to trust me. As a new pilot, you screw up all the time. It's important for the instructor to build you up so you have the confidence to try again."



Ellery Norman
Class of 2025

"I'm one of those rare students who didn't want to come to WMAA. In fact, I only came because my parents didn't give me a choice. I didn't want anything to do with aviation, either. I planned to be a dentist and take over my dad's practice.

"But then my friends started talking about aviation and encouraging me to get involved. They made it sound like I was missing out if I didn't give it a try. So I did.

"I can honestly say that ground school was the hardest class I ever took. I work really hard to get all As, but I failed the first exam in ground school. I went to Mr. Sebeck and shared that I have dyslexia. From that point on, he made a special effort to ensure that I understood the material. He was always there for me, and still checks in on me today. He was my favorite teacher.

"But guys just don't understand what it's like to be a woman in a man's world. Having Shannon and Grace around meant that I always had someone with whom I could talk. I joined the Lady Aviators Club my senior year because I felt I could be a role model for the young women coming behind me, just like Shannon and Grace had been for me.

"Now I'm at Northwestern Michigan, working to earn additional ratings. Once I complete my commercial rating, I would like to come back to Grand Rapids and fly corporate. I would also like to speak to the Lady Aviators next year, to show other young women what is possible."

"In my experience, the most powerful thing for a young girl to see is a woman older than her who has walked the road." (Shannon VanZegeren)

Your Impact in Action



Program Support at WMAA

Thanks to the generosity of our donors, our school is filled with opportunities for students to explore, discover, and soar. Here are just a few of the ways your support makes a difference.

Aviation Flight Program Supported the maintenance and continued use of WMAA’s aircraft fleet, including funding toward flight hours for student pilots and simulation time for foundational training.	Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Program Helped fund the purchase of updated drones and technology to enhance real-world training, and FAA certification preparation for students pursuing remote pilot licenses.	Build-A-Plane Program Provided hands-on learning experiences as students worked to restore and build actual aircraft, deepening their understanding of aircraft systems, tools, and aviation career paths.
Engineering & Design Enabled students to access 3D printing materials, design software, and project-based learning that supports real-time problem solving and innovation.	Robotics Team Offset costs for robotics competitions, registration, and materials to help students design, build, and compete regionally and nationally.	Industry Exposure & Career Pathway Exploration Supported travel, speakers, and career exploration events that helped connect students with aviation professionals and post-secondary opportunities.

Your Impact on Sustainability

When WMAA was started in 2010, the aviation industry faced a significant pilot shortage. The demand for pilots has not let up since then. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics anticipates approximately 16,800 job openings for pilots annually. Boeing estimates that North America alone will require 127,000 new pilots by 2042.

The STEM fields are also projected to grow, employing more than 11.8 million by 2033 with a median salary of \$101,650. That’s more than double the salary of non-STEM occupations.

We are proud and honored to have graduated almost 200 students with a private pilot license since 2013. Many of those students have gone on to earn the additional ratings

and hours needed to pilot commercial, business and freight flights. The ripple effect will only continue to grow.

WMAA has also developed a reputation for its hands-on approach to extensive STEM opportunities. Whereas a typical high school might offer a few engineering courses, WMAA offers 15-20 in any given year. This includes bio-medical engineering, which is usually a college-level class.

This unquestioned success and continued growth frequently raises the question: why are there not more schools like this? And the answer is simple: running a STEM and aviation-focused high school requires flexibility and sustainability that cannot be achieved solely through public funding.

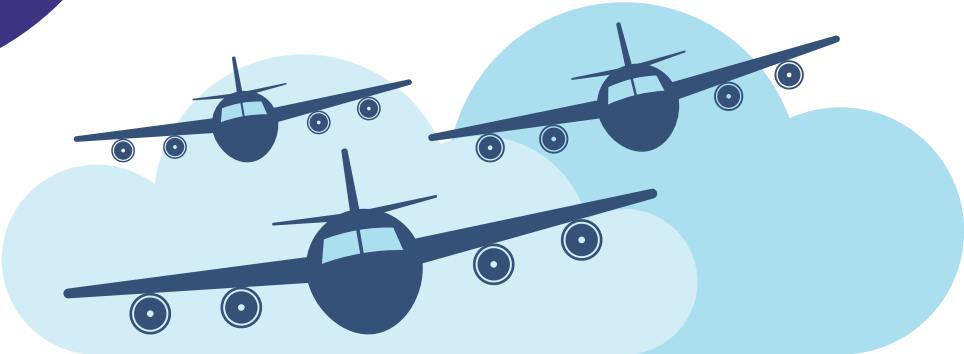
We, and our students, are deeply grateful to the donors and corporate partners who provide funding that sustains our unique and compelling programs.

Annual Airplane Maintenance 2024-2025



■ FTC Airport Lease	\$28,931
■ Fuel & Oil	\$45,602
■ Maintenance	\$49,968
■ Insurance:	
● Aircraft	\$54,975
● Aviation General Liability . . .	\$ 9,520
● Pollution Control	\$ 2,743
■ Aircraft Sustainment Fund	\$41,757

**Total Annual Cost
(three planes):
\$233,496**



WEST MICHIGAN
AVIATION ACADEMY
FOUNDATION

5363 44th St SE
Grand Rapids MI 49512



Thank You!

Thank you to all the table hosts and guests who attended our Broadening Horizons Breakfast on October 2. This annual Breakfast is a wonderful way for new people to connect to WMAA. Our staff, students and board did a fabulous job of sharing stories that are the essence of WMAA: culture, achievement, empowerment and opportunity.

We extend special thanks to our event sponsors: Amway Aviation, Gulfstream, Mayday Avionics, RDV, and the Rev Foundation. Their sponsorship ensures that every dollar given goes straight to the programs and opportunities that help set WMAA apart. We sincerely appreciate each dollar given, and look forward to enriching students in the coming year thanks to your generosity!

15th Annual
**Leaders
Tomorrow**
Gala

Save the Date: May 14, 2026

You won't want to miss the 15th annual Leaders of Tomorrow Gala! Full of inspiration and engagement, this event celebrates WMAA's impact on students and our broader community.

Please visit our website to learn more about the event and sponsorship opportunities. Sponsors help underwrite the cost of the event so that 100% of all gifts go to support the amazing opportunities and experiences offered to WMAA students. If you would like to be a new sponsor, please email Meggan George to join our mailing list. We've sold out for the last two years, so act early and guarantee your spot at this incredible event.



Connect With Us



wmaafoundation.org



[@wmaafoundation](https://www.instagram.com/wmaafoundation)



[fb.com/WestMichiganAviation
AcademyFoundation](https://fb.com/WestMichiganAviationAcademyFoundation)

WMAA Foundation Contact Information

(616) 446-8886

5363 44th St SE | Grand Rapids MI 49512

Meggan George (ext. 1112)

Director of Development & Marketing
mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org

Stephanie Taylor (ext. 1168)

Development Manager
staylor@wmaafoundation.org