

HORIZONS

Views and Perspectives from WEST MICHIGAN AVIATION ACADEMY

Summer 2025

WMAA Supporters are **FORMING** THE **FUTURE**

An emotional Dick DeVos reminded guests at the *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala* on May 15 just how much has been achieved since the school opened in 2010.

"According to Niche, we are the best charter school in Michigan," Dick shared. "Close to 200 students have earned a private pilot license. We are in the top 10 of all public schools in the state, with a 99% parent satisfaction rate. Seeing the success of this school is one of the great joys of my life."

The sold-out crowd enjoyed mingling with WMAA students as they browsed demonstrations, tried their hand on a flight simulator, or learned about drone courses and historic airplane renovations. Approximately 150 students demonstrated how they are pushing the frontiers of excellence as they helped transport, greet, and share information with guests about the formative opportunities that are helping them discover their futures.

Keynote speaker Michelle "MACE" Curan finished the evening with a soul-stirring plea to conquer the fear of vulnerability and take chances. Michelle led an impressive career as a fighter pilot during her 13 years in the United States Air Force. She was only the second woman to fly as the Lead Solo in the Thunderbird demonstration since the team's creation in 1953.

We extend our sincere thanks to Gulfstream Aerospace, our title sponsor, and Embrear, our VIP Reception sponsor. We also thank the other 65 sponsors and generous donors who have given our students so much through their financial support of this event. We are truly grateful for the incredible community support extended to WMAA and our students.

Save the Date! The 15th annual *Leaders of Tomorrow Gala* will be held Thursday, May 14, 2026.



"Courage doesn't come from being 100% ready. It comes from doing things anyway."
(Michelle "MACE" Curan)



Patrick DeVito, Gulfstream scholarship winner

Turning Dreams Into Reality



Matthew Smith, with parents Licha and Larry (Class of 2014)

We recently caught up with Matthew Smith (Class of 2014) and Patrick DeVito (Class of 2025). Matthew is a WMAA pioneer. Not only was he a member of our first graduating class, he was also one of the first three students to earn his private pilot license. Patrick just earned his private pilot license. They, along with parents Larry Smith and Kerry DeVito, shared perspectives on the aviation program, the opportunities, and the ways in which donors have helped them fulfill their dreams.



Patrick DeVito (Class of 2025)

Q. Why did you choose WMAA?

Larry

"We actually chose WMMA for Matthew. He didn't really get a vote! When we attended a meeting with Dick DeVos, what we heard and saw in our minds eye was the vision of an educational opportunity of a lifetime. It was as if a home school environment was being created, and had resources that we could never ever match."

Patrick

"I've been obsessed with aviation since I was a kid. I found out about WMAA and instantly knew this is where I wanted to be. I was 75th on the wait list after the lottery, which was crushing. But two weeks before school started, I got the call that I was in. My mom and I both started to cry."

Q. What got you interested in aviation?

Matthew

"I grew up on a farm. All machines fascinated me, but airplanes hold the number one spot in my heart. To me, the airplane is the coolest machine. It has the best of everything."

Patrick

"Planes were always my passion. I would seek out airport viewing areas to take photos and videos. Every time we went out of state, I would ask, 'Is there a good place to watch airplanes here?'"

Q. What stands out to you about Patrick's fascination with aviation?

Kerry

"At 11 years old, he could tell us where planes all over the country were — what kind of plane, where it was going, how many people were on it. He was constantly tracking planes. When one was flying over overhead, he would suddenly just jump up and run outside with his eyes glued to the sky!"

Q. What is one of your favorite aviation memories at WMAA?

Matthew

"Glider camp was the coolest thing ever. You're like a bird in the air, but with immense responsibility. It teaches you very early on about the importance of making the right decisions."

Patrick

"The first time I climbed into the cockpit of a WMAA plane was magical. I sat down, adjusted everything, and said, 'Wow! This is me! I've been watching and now I'm about to fly!' It was sunset, and we flew over Byron Center. My dad stopped the team he was coaching to watch. It was incredible."

Q. What does it mean to you that you were able to explore aviation at WMAA?

Matthew “I dreamed of flying for Delta and now I’m doing it. They don’t take everyone...they’re pretty picky. It’s a little surreal to me that I was hired so soon. I think my experience at WMAA set me on a trajectory to succeed.”

Patrick “I have wanted to fly planes since I was a little kid. You could say I’m obsessed with aviation. WMAA has helped me feel prepared and ready to earn more ratings and explore my career options.”

Q. How do your parents feel about your achievements?

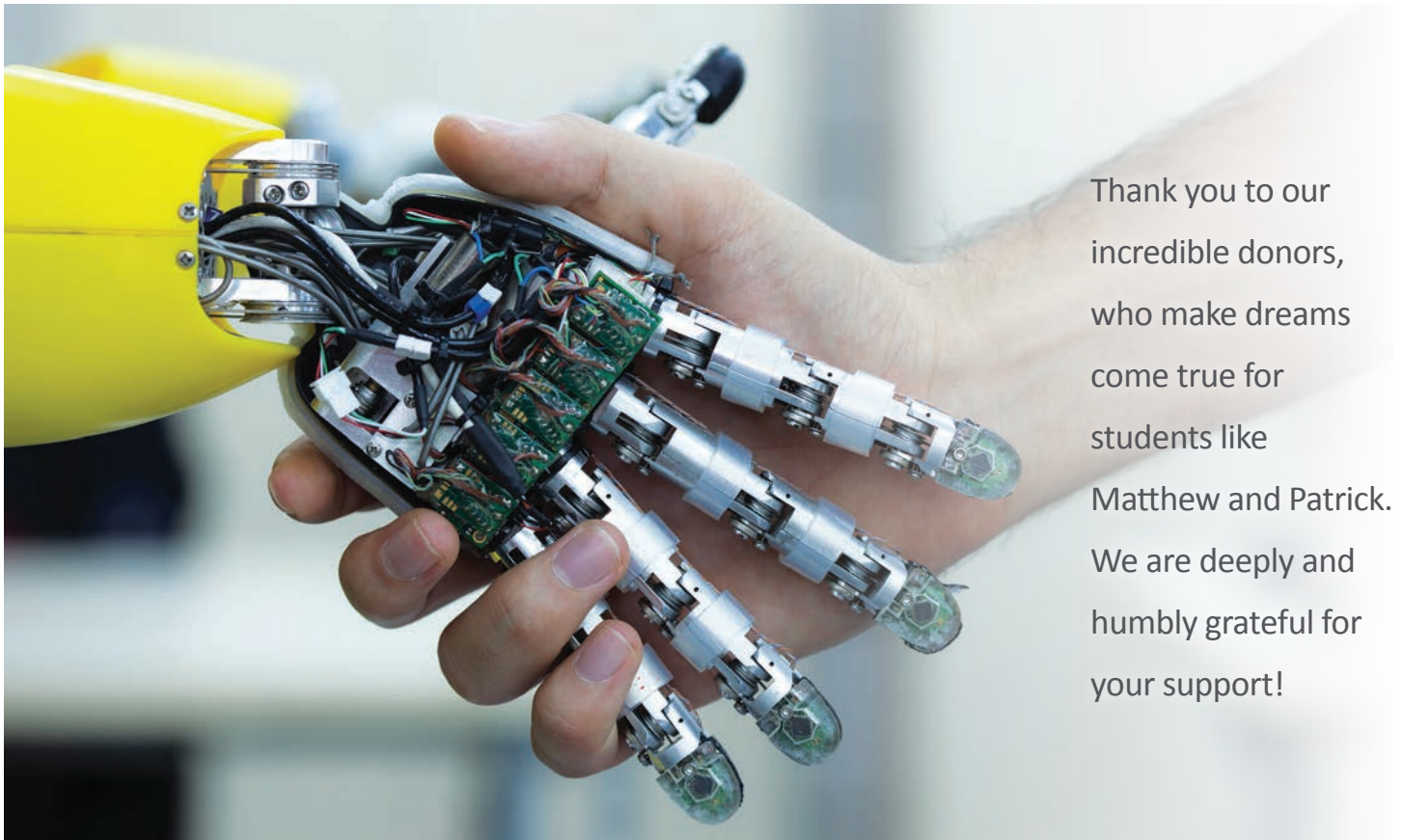
Larry “We are proud to see each new flying job and the new skills acquired with those positions. We are also thankful for the WMAA mission and vision, and the courage to follow through and execute those core beliefs. In my opinion, the WMAA culture is the glue that gives the meaning, the heart, and the reason why students want to attend WMAA.”

Kerry “When Patrick walked through the doors of WMAA, he found his people. In finding a space to thrive through WMAA, the person inside came to the surface in a special way. To see Patrick living out his dreams, through so much hard work, is profound. We are so incredibly proud of him.”

Q. What would you like to say to the donors who support WMAA?

Matthew “I wouldn’t be here, doing what I love, if people did not give their time and money to WMAA. And it keeps getting better. Coming back more than 10 years later, WMAA looks more like a college than a high school. Students like Patrick know more and have better flying skills than I did when I graduated. The students are sharp and they can achieve far more because of the pathways that are open to them.”

Patrick “Flight training is expensive. There’s no way my family could have funded it. Being able to earn my private pilot license through WMAA was a dream come true.”



Thank you to our incredible donors, who make dreams come true for students like Matthew and Patrick. We are deeply and humbly grateful for your support!

Celebrating Service

At WMAA, we are very focused on helping students build career pathways while also building character. That combination leads a certain number of students to gravitate toward military service each year.

We start working with students in 10th grade to provide career and college support. Military service is a deeply respected career choice at WMAA. If students are interested in the military, we offer great resources:

- We can administer the military entrance exam.
- We have a military recruiter on site several times per week.
- We have staff members with experience in several branches of the armed services.

The Military Needs Students Like Ours

The Defense Department estimates that just 2% of 20.6 million 17- to 21-year-olds have the desired combination of strong academic credentials, adequate physical fitness and an interest in serving. In contrast to this, approximately 10% of 2025 WMAA graduates indicated their interest in a military career after graduation.

“Choosing to serve your country right out of high school is something you will never regret,” says George Pavey, a former Marine who is now our Dean of Aviation & Engineering. “It is an individual sacrifice to serve a higher calling. And while we are not recruiting students specifically for military service, I think those of us who have served are role models. The kids see the kind of people the military attracts, and they want to be part of it.”



Honoring Military Service

The Veterans Wall of Honor in our hallway recognizes students, faculty, WMAA staff, and board members who have served their country. There are currently 95 names on this wall! We sincerely honor and thank all those who have heeded the call to serve our country through the military.

Shane Rinzema, Class of 2025 (U.S. Marine Corps)

Shane Rinzema is a great example of how WMAA can transform futures. He had no intention of attending WMAA. In fact, Shane had his heart set on going to another high school with his friends. As he rather candidly admits, “I promised to try WMAA for one year to make my mom happy.” Four years later, he graduated without ever having looked back.

What was the lure? “I got hooked into the RC Club and Science Olympiad and made friends,” Shane says. “Then I heard about the private pilot license and realized that I wanted to fly. But I knew that civilian flying would be too slow, so I started considering the military.”

Talking with Mr. Sebeck and Mr. Pavey about their experiences inspired Shane to pursue a military career. He was accepted into the highly competitive Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps, and will attend Eastern Michigan University to earn a bachelor’s degree in Aviation Management Technology.



Danielle Topolinski, Class of 2025 (Air National Guard)

Danielle came to WMAA unsure about her career aspirations. She, too, caught the aviation bug after earning an incentive flight. From there, she dug into all the aviation-related classes she could take, including the hands-on Build-A-Plane course.

“Last fall, the National Guard visited WMAA with a Blackhawk helicopter,” Danielle recalls. “That was pretty interesting. So was the conversation I had with a friend from WMAA who is currently serving in the Air National Guard in Ft. Wayne. I started doing some research and felt called to serve.”

Danielle enlisted in the Air National Guard, which is affiliated with the Air Force. She loves hands-on work, so is excited about being a crew chief for the F-16 and working maintenance on the flight line.

It’s all part of her long-range plan. “This is a building block,” Danielle says. “I’m going to earn my bachelor’s degree after basic training. Then I want to go to Officer Training School and military pilot training.”



You Can Help Our Students Soar!

We often share stories about students who have soared to new heights of achievement at WMAA. Foundation Board president Terry Russell says, “We can expect more of our kids if we give them opportunities.”

Terry continues, “It’s inspiring to our students when you show up as a donor. And you, in turn, will be amazed as you learn more about our students and their achievements. Together, we create one perpetual feedback loop of inspiration.” You can get involved in that loop through our Soaring Together Program. It provides a way for donors to, as the name implies, rise to a higher level of understanding and commitment.

WHAT IS IT? The Soaring Together Program recognizes donors who make an annual gift of \$1,000 or more to the WMAA Foundation, without any reciprocating benefits such as tickets or sponsorship.

WHY DO WE NEED IT? As a public charter high school, WMAA receives a per-pupil stipend from the state, which covers the traditional courses. However, we provide educational opportunities above and beyond what can be found in other high schools. Those opportunities require an investment of approximately \$1,500–\$2,000 per student, per year.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT? Each new member of the Soaring Together Program provides most or all of the extra financial support needed to support one or more students. Having that reliable source of funding allows us to continue investing in extraordinary experiences



WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES?

HOW CAN I JOIN? Simply make a gift or gifts totaling \$1,000 or more each year and we will welcome you into the club. If you would like more information, please visit wmaafoundation.org/support or contact Meggan George, Director of Development and Marketing, at mgeorge@wmaafoundation.org or (616) 446-8886 x1112.



\$1,000 Provides new uniforms for 16 students or one year of 3D printing materials..		\$2,000 Pays for one year of Redbird simulator maintenance or covers FAA drone license testing for 15 students.		\$5,000 Pays for two 100-hour airplane safety inspections or one year of supplies for Aerospace engineering.	
\$10,000 Provides three months of fuel for a plane, or commercial-grade UAS equipment.		\$15,000 Pays for one season of Summer Glider Camp or one year of Saturday school.		\$20,000 Pays for half of an airplane engine overhaul.	

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Thank You, Al Smith!

The WMAA Foundation Board was formed in 2019. These board members have a tremendous responsibility as they work with the Foundation to fill the gap between State funding and what it costs to provide all the educational options at WMAA.

On behalf of the Foundation, both boards, the school and especially our students, we wish to thank Al Smith for his incredible gift of service as he finished his final term on June 30, 2025. He joined the Foundation board at its inception, and has faithfully used his connections and skills to help us achieve our mission.

Please join us in thanking Al and all the other board members who are committed to providing WMAA students with so many incredible and unique opportunities.

Save the Date!

Our annual Broadening Horizons Breakfast is a wonderful opportunity to introduce new people to the mission of WMAA and the accomplishments of our students. Please save **Thursday, October 2, 2025** for this important event, and stay tuned for more information.

Connect With Us



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