

Pilots bring flight to academy for Black teens

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.

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Currently in aviation only about seven percent of all U.S. pilots are African-American.

For those who fly regularly, this number might not seem shocking, as it is quite rare to see an African-American in a commercial cockpit. Some might even be shocked that the percentage is even that high. But a group of aviators in the Twin Cities is working to boost the appallingly low numbers and introduce a new generation of African-Americans to a career in flight.

The Twin Cities chapter of the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP) is reaching out to African-American teens to participate in its Aviation Career Education (ACE) Academy, set for June 16 - 20 of next year. A goal of the program is to motivate and empower youth to pursue educational opportunities in the field of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) – and flight in particular.

“Academy attendees will acquire invaluable life skills, and build the necessary skills to pilot an aircraft in the process,” said Floyd Balentine, director of the OBAP Twin Cities ACE Academy.

Balentine, 38, a native of north Minneapolis, is a pilot for Endeavor Air, an airline that operates regionally under the banner of Delta Airlines and Delta Connect. The 14-year flight veteran said the main reason African-Americans are largely absent in the Aerospace industry is lack of access.

“I lived in a place where a lot of people didn’t want to come and give us the information (about careers in flight),” said Balentine, who said he grew up in an area considered the projects of north Minneapolis that is now the site of Heritage Park. “That’s why I’m doing what I’m doing because no one wanted to come in the ‘hood’ and encourage me to be a pilot.”

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Balentine said academies such as ACE have been in existence for quite some time, but they have not been accessible to students of color.

“Those programs are geared for people with money that live in the suburbs,” said Balentine.

The academy director said the OBAP ACE program aims to be affordable, accessible and ultimately, life changing. The week-long camp costs students \$75 – and scholarships are available – and will offer students the opportunity to fly a Cessna 152 airplane, learning to takeoff and land and tour an air traffic control tower.

“We need a program that will change the hearts and minds of students,” said Balentine.

“There’s simply a lack of exposure here.”

Besides exposure, an additional barrier to a career in flight is cost. Balentine, who is a graduate of St. Cloud State University, said when he became a fully licensed and rated commercial pilot it cost him close to \$25,000 and he received grants and loans to pay for it all. He said today that amount would be double.

“One thing about being a pilot, you have to have a passion for it,” said Balentine, who said he and other ACE instructors are donating their time to the academy. “My goal is to inspire students to achieve.”

“This program is so important because it introduces careers in aviation and aerospace to a population of children who would otherwise not have such exposure,” said Joy Mosley, board member of the Twin Cities OBAP and United States Air Force veteran. “A Black pilot is not something most African-American children see everyday. Hopefully we’ll be able to take high school students and develop a pipeline to colleges and universities that offer aeronautical programs or technical training in aerospace.”

Mosley, who holds a master’s degree in urban ministry, is also calling on churches to step up in introducing students to careers in STEM.

“We really need the faith-based community to engage our youth and introduce them to real world career opportunities in STEM,” said Mosley.

For additional information on OBAP’s ACE academy Balentine can be reached at (612) 386-4396 or via email at obaptwincitiesaceacadmey@gmail.com.