

Aviation enthusiasts took Young Eagles under their wings at a recent event. The groups came together to show children that the love of flight can take root at tarmacs big and small.

By **JOSEPH FRANCIS**

Daily Sun Staff Writer

Children and their parents prepared for a fun day of flying at an asphalt airfield on Saturday.

The stakes were low as the aircraft in question were scale models controlled by radio. Nonetheless, the Southern Eagle Squadron, in association with the Young Eagles youth group, kicked off the event at the airfield in Lady Lake with a primer on RC aircraft etiquette.

“We (started) the day off with ground school, teaching the kids the layout of the field, which areas are safe to land in, and how to manipulate the plane into a good starting position,” said Frank Mintz, of the Village of Hillsborough and president of the Southern Eagles Squadron. “We’ll also show them how the planes differ from full-size aircraft, such as how the

control surfaces are moved by radio controls.”

The idea for the event came courtesy of Marty Harris. He is with the steering committee for the Young Eagles, a youth wing of Chapter 534 of the Experimental Aircraft Association that meets at the Leesburg International Airport.

“I had the idea to introduce the kids to radio-controlled flying, and I reached out to a number of local organizations” he said. “Eventually Frank got back to me.”

The EAA started as a group of aircraft aficionados with a penchant for homebuilt, or “experimental,” aircraft. Now the international organization deals in nearly every aspect of flying.

The Young Eagles are able to absorb the wisdom of professionals and hobbyists in the field of aviation in preparation for their own aerial endeavors while enjoying breakfasts at the hangar, flights out of the airport and more.

They also assist with the

group’s aircraft builds.

“While they can’t work on the engines or any of the flight equipment because of FAA regulations, they are a big help polishing and buffing the planes,” said Harris, of Ocklawaha.

The group, Mintz said, has been around since 2006 and members are from Leesburg, Lady Lake, The Villages and beyond.

The 30-acre field they fly their model aircraft and drones out of is a closed, repurposed Lake-county landfill and serves as a base of operations for the group.

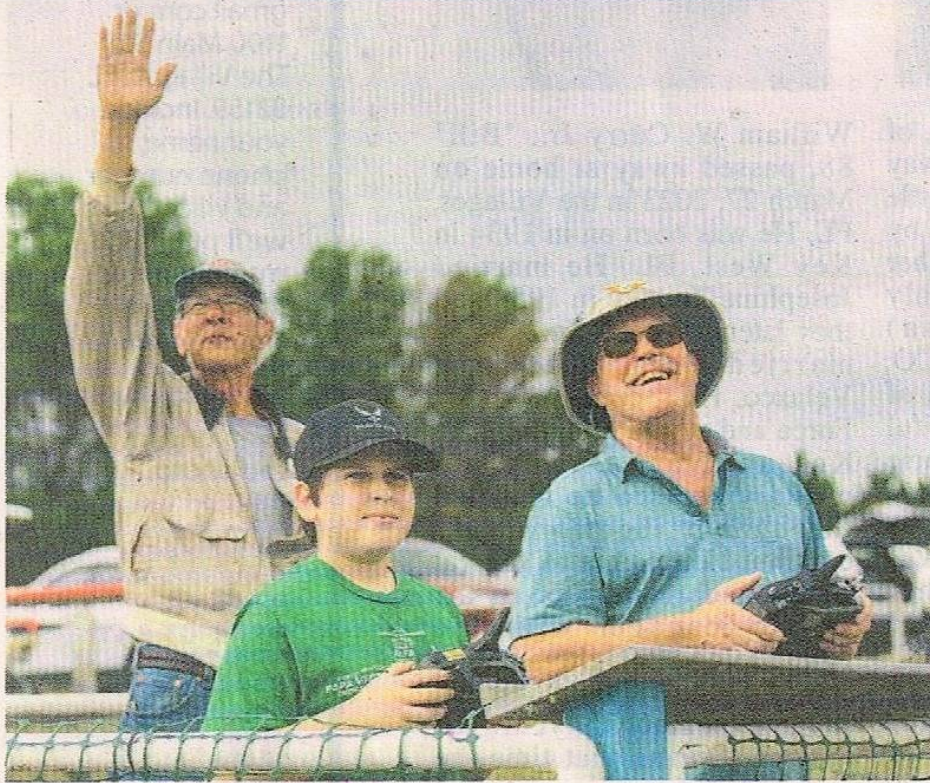
“We try to keep the field in great shape not just for our members, but to keep our landlord happy,” Mintz said. “We keep it in compliance with safety codes, and we fly what we’re supposed to fly when and where we are meant to do so.”

For its event Saturday, the Southern Eagles Squadron pulled out all the stops with a computer-based simulator to help attendees get the hang of radio-operated flying controls.

Mintz likened watching younger enthusiasts take to flying to the conversations about sports he had with his sons.

“There’s a lot of energy you get fed back from young people who are interested in something you’re also interested in,” he said. “That increases and compounds the enjoyment for me. I get excited all over again, remembering those days I just started flying.”

Harris, who used to fly with Young Eagles in a previous chapter he was involved with, asked one thing of parents of the children under his supervision.



Mason McClintock, left, 12, flies a model airplane with Rick Smith, of the Village of Pine Hills, during a Southern Eagle Squadron RC model airplane club hosted event for "Young Eagles," at Southern Eagle Squadron RC Club. Tim Belongia, of Lady Lake, holds up his hand to signal that McClintock has control of the model airplane.

*Caitlyn Jordan,
Daily Sun*

"Isaid what you can do is have a kid write me a note of what they enjoyed about their time with the club," Harris said. "I kept those notes tucked away, which said things like 'Mr. Harris was wonderful.' To catch up with those kids later on and find out that they joined the Air Force, got their pilot's license, or became mechanics — that has been the joy of all this."

The Southern Eagle Squadron and EAA Chapter

534 are open to enthusiasts of all ages.

The Southern Eagle Squadron also issues 30-day passes for use of its RC airfield for \$50. For more information or to register, go to southerneaglesquadron.com.

For more information or to register for EAA Chapter 534, go to eachapter534.org.

Staff writer Joseph Francis can be reached at 352-753-1119, ext. 5414, or joseph.francis@thevillagesmedia.com.