TETERBORO MUSEUM HOSTS HANDS-ON EVENT

A weekend for kids to get the feel of flying

BY ALLISON PRIES STAFF WRITER

TETERBORO — Mark Twadros and his little sister, Jolie, have flown more places than many adults.

Spain, Egypt, Italy, France — the list goes on.

“Just I haven’t seen the inside of a cockpit,” said the 9-year-old, who on Saturday got that chance when he climbed aboard several retired aircraft at the Aviation Hall of Fame’s Open Cockpit event.

The museum has for more than a decade held open cockpit days, but last November, it decided to make the well-attended event a weekend-long affair — and it’s been a success, said Shea Oakley, executive director of the Aviation Hall of Fame.

The museum draws roughly 6,000 guests each year; in 2014, some 250 people visited during open cockpit weekend.

“We’re a small museum of limited means — like many others,” he said. “This was a real revenue producer and a great education for kids.”

On his desk in the two-story building on Fred Wehran Drive alongside Teterboro Airport, Oakley has documentation of his lifelong love of aviation.

“It’s a picture of himself at 21 months old holding a blue-and-white plane bearing the markings of the since-defunct Eastern Air Lines.”

“Our mission is to encourage young children to go into aviation,” said Oakley, 47.

“Someone here today may be the first man or woman to land on Mars.”

The museum, which was founded in 1972 and moved to its current location in the mid-1980s, survives on fundraisers, admissions fees, donations and less than $3,500 per year from Bergen County.

On display are elements of New Jersey’s breadth of flight history, showing the growth of the aviation industry, from a hot air balloon basket kids can stand in to fragments of the Hindenburg airship that caught fire and was destroyed in 1937 when it attempted to dock in Lakehurst, and plaques of the more than 140 inductees in the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame. The list comprises household names like Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart, as well as lesser known heroes, such as Maj. Joseph Creeca, a F-4 weapons system officer from Bloomingfield who was shot down over Vietnam and spent more than six years as a prisoner of war.

State’s link to the sky

An upstairs room is dedicated to area airports — of which Teterboro was the first to welcome air traffic in 1920, followed by Newark Airport in 1928, La Guardia in 1939 and John F. Kennedy International in 1948.

Oakley said.

A restored anti-collision beacon — a light-house for aircraft — dating back to the 1930s has been retired to the airport room. It once sat on a corner of the old Bendix Corp., at the corner of Industrial Avenue and Route 46, which for 70 years made cockpit instruments and, later, components for spaceflight.

There’s also a space exhibit featuring astronauts who hail from the Garden State, including Mark and Scott Kelly — twin brothers who will both be monitored physically while Scott spends a record year aboard the International Space Station. An exhibit devoted solely to the Kellys is expected to open in early summer, Oakley said.

“Just New Jersey is to the aviation industry is what Silicon Valley is to computers,” said Bruce Meyer, a retired Continental Airlines captain and 767 pilot who volunteers at the museum.

Nathan Sprague, 27, and his girlfriend Jess McGarry, 26, both of New Milford, toured the museum for the first time Saturday. It was Sprague’s idea to come. He recently graduated from aviation school and is applying to become an air-traffic controller.

“It’s overwhelming — it’s a good way,” McGarry said. “There are a lot of little things and a lot of big things to look at.”

For the regular admission price, visitors this weekend can sit at the controls of a Bell Cobra attack helicopter that still has interior bullet holes from combat missions it flew during Vietnam, an airport firetruck and four other aircraft.

Planes of the past

The museum’s latest addition, a large section of a Convair 880 TWA airliner, was a favorite of the Twadros family, who travels frequently.

Visitors can step inside the aircraft, which was recovered from Atlantic City Airport after being used for safety testing. The section on display, which includes the cockpit and first two rows of first class, serves to give a glimpse of the whole aircraft, a role that was built in 1959 and flown from 1961 until about 1973. A gas guzzler, it was grounded due to an oil embargo.

“There are so many buttons and switches,” Mark said. “How would you remember what they’re all for?”

Email: priesa@northjersey.com