

Free airplane rides for kids in St. Petersburg on Saturday

By Sherry Robinson, Times Staff Writer
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Pilot Dave Oliver straps Kevin Hernandez into the cockpit before a flight, below. They are in Oliver's RV6.



[MIKE RAMOS | Special to the Times]

ST. PETERSBURG — As a little girl back in Pennsylvania, Terri Griner remembers flying in her uncle's plane.

She was 3, and her uncle kept a plane under his house. "It's just something that I've done forever," she says of flying. "It starts with the kids."

Griner, who is president of the Albert Whitted Airport Preservation Society, hopes to instill that love of flight in bay area kids. The Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 47 will host a Young Eagles Flight Rally at the airport from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. Pilots will take kids ages 8 to 17 up into the sky over St. Petersburg and beyond. And the rides are free.

"They will fly for about a half-hour," said Griner, 50, a kindergarten teacher at Fairmount Park Elementary School in St. Petersburg. She says the kids will fly out to the Skyway Bridge, over the beaches and then back downtown.

"Free airplane rides are just part of the Flight Rally," Griner said. "We hope to build one-to-one relationships between pilots and young people, giving a new generation a chance to learn more about the possibilities that exist in the world of aviation."

When the flight is completed, each child will receive a certificate naming them an official Young Eagle; a logbook for recording this and subsequent aviation experiences; and an access code to an online pilot training course. And each Young Eagle's name will be entered into the World's Largest Logbook, which is on display at the EAA AirVenture Museum in Oshkosh, Wis. The logbook is also accessible on the Web at www.youneagles.org.

The Young Eagles Program was created in 1992 to interest young people in aviation. Volunteer EAA pilots have flown more than 1.5 million young people in more than 90 countries. Actor Harrison Ford, who serves as EAA Young Eagles national chairman, has flown nearly 300 kids since becoming involved in the program in 2001.

At Saturday's rally, Griner said she expects about 100 to 125 kids. The pilots usually take two or three passengers at a time, depending on the size of the aircraft and the weight of the kids.

The pilots do an entire safety inspection before going up, Griner said. "They don't fly if something doesn't look right," she said.

And that includes the weather.

"Pilots will make sure that their planes are very secure." Each pilot carries personal liability insurance of \$100,000 per passenger and are insured for \$1 million by the EAA for participating in the Young Eagles' program.

There have been times when kids have been a little hesitant to go up, Griner said. "But then, once they go up, they say, 'I want to go again.'" And that's what she and the EAA are hoping for.

"Once kids are connected, they just want to keep flying."

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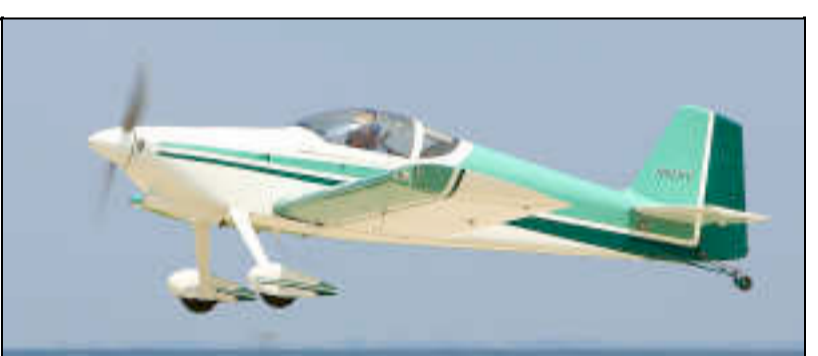
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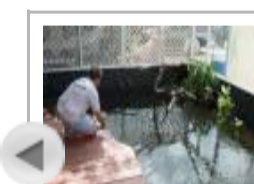
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Flight Rally

10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at Albert Whitted Airport, 480 Bayshore Drive SE, St. Petersburg. A parent or guardian must be present to sign a consent form for children ages 8-17 to participate. The consent forms can be found at www.awaps.org or www.eaa47.org. For more information, call Terri Griner at (727) 822-1532.