

Flying lessons

High-school project gave students a lifetime of confidence

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BY AMY SAUNDERS

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In an era when students at Hamilton Township High School had their struggles in the classroom, teacher Bill Newnham offered them a challenge far more difficult than math homework.

He proposed that they build an airplane - a full-scale, two-seat Long-EZ that he would someday trust to fly.

To get Project School Flight off the ground in 1985, Newnham persuaded the board of education to establish an aviation class, with friends and vendors donating \$25,000 in composite materials, an engine and other parts.

And, most important, he recruited 14-year-olds to volunteer their Saturdays to the assignment.

Five years and thousands of hours later, the aircraft was completed.

The experience for some of the 40 students who contributed to its construction took them to careers in engineering, aeronautics and other technical fields.

"Without Bill, I'm not sure if I would have gone into engineering," said Andy Drumm, a 38-year-old engineer for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency in Bowling Green. "He was that big of an influence."

Meanwhile, although the plane had been prominently displayed at Port Columbus in the early 1990s, it spent the next 15 years hidden from view, resting in an Ohio Historical Society warehouse.

Only this month did Newnham, 75, and a few of his former students reunite with their masterpiece, now that it's being donated to the Historical Aircraft Squadron Museum at the Fairfield County Airport in Carroll.



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Together again, from left: teacher Bill Newnham and former students Scott Martin, Rob Martin, Andy Drumm and Chris Gayheart



The Long-EZ aircraft, built by students starting in 1985



BILL NEWNHAM |

The nonprofit museum plans to restore the plane to its original flying condition and display it in its hangar, which is open to the public Wednesdays through Sundays.

"It's a beautiful airplane; it was ahead of its time," said Pat Ferguson, museum president. "It's unbelievable that a bunch of kids got together and built this thing. It's not easy to do."

In the early 1980s, Newnham learned that a friend from his 20-year Air Force career had purchased materials for a Long-EZ plane but, because of an upcoming move to Europe, would be unable to work on it.

An industrial-arts teacher at Hamilton Township Middle School, Newnham imagined that high-school students, instead, could build the plane. Such a program, he thought, would benefit not only students interested in aviation but also the public perception of the school district.

"Most people thought of it as a joke when you said you worked for Hamilton Township; it was at the very bottom, scholastically," he said. "(The project) was, at the time, a show that the kids were just as good as any other kids in Franklin County."

He drove to Omaha, Neb., to pick up the plane parts, his friend having agreed to donate more than \$6,000 in materials to the board of education. Various vendors contributed parts such as fiberglass, batteries and lights; another friend lent an engine.

And so Newnham's "Aviation Technology" class began, with about 15 students each semester. Daily class time focused on aviation theory, safety and other classroom lessons, while students worked on projects after school or on Saturdays in the school machine shop.

Most of the students - all male except one - were the types who grew up playing with Erector sets and, later, working on their cars. They didn't mind the extra class hours.

"Everybody enjoyed that time," said Scott Martin, 37, of Pickerington, an electrical supervisor at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "Mr. Newnham had a lot of trust in us; he just let us do the work."

Other students at school sometimes scoffed at the project, doubting that it would be finished - and not understanding the time and dedication involved.

"Our peers were like 'Whatever, man; I got a party to go to,'" said Mike Hollander, a 40-year-old engineer for the Navy in Washington, D.C. "We didn't really care what others thought; we did our own thing."

With Newnham's guidance, students learned to read diagrams and instructions in assembling the plane - skills that would become more important in the project's later years.

As the plane neared completion, Newnham started thinking about its first flight. For insurance reasons, he was the only person authorized to be its pilot.

Yet the plane never took flight, after Newnham learned he had lymphoma, an effect of exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Bill Newnham, center, with a team of his high-school students and the plane they built, in 1990



In 1990, while undergoing chemotherapy, he continued to teach his middle-school classes but couldn't supervise the high-school project.

The plane needed a few more pieces of hardware, not to mention a paint job that would require it to be disassembled. Newnham assumed that the work wouldn't be done without him.

Then, that December, he returned to school for what he thought was a meeting but instead was a surprise party in his honor. His students took him to the shop, where the plane had been painted in the school's colors of yellow and green, and emblazoned with his name.

"They had to do all the finalizing and the detailing; that's very tedious work," he said. "It was a total amazement to me."

He keeps in touch with his former students, proudly listing their educational and career achievements. He still refers to them as "kids," and most of them call him "Mr. Newnham."

Despite a Navy career that has taken Hollander to Iraq and Afghanistan - where he has worked with explosives - the 1988 graduate of Hamilton Township still considers the high-school project a significant milestone in his education and his life.

"Along your path, you get confused about where you're going sometimes and need to look back at a reference point," he said. "For me, it was 'What would Mr. Newnham or I have done when we were building the plane?'

"That was the foundation."

asaunders@dispatch.com

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