

ORGANIZATION OF BLACK AIRLINE PILOTS: "Cradle to Career"

You can soar!" is a motivational speaker's cliché. But the Organization of Black Airline Pilots bypasses the rhetoric and goes straight to the reality, giving teenagers the opportunity to fly during OBAP's Project Aviator programs every summer—and then to go further.

In 1976, one pilot, Benjamin Thomas of Eastern Airlines, looked at the airline industry from a black pilot's perspective and, seeing that very few African Americans were flying for major airlines, organized a group that 30 years later has grown to 3,000 members. OBAP was formed with the goal of supporting and increasing that small number of black pilots, and it aimed at the most likely target—young people. OBAP's programs zero in on disadvantaged kids who might need

By Susan Burke, Publications Specialist

help in seeing a successful future for themselves, but it also includes any child who is attracted to aviation.

"We focus our attention on nurturing young people, planting the seed not only for the possibility of being an airline pilot but also for all other employment in the airline business," said Capt. Karl Minter (United), who was just elected to his second term as OBAP's president. "Our motto is 'Cradle to Career.' We talk to kids from elementary school to college—72,400 of them last year—all with volunteers, coordinating with the Tuskegee Airmen, the National Society of Black Engineers, the National Black Controllers and Federal Aviation Employees,

Negro Airmen International, and Black Pilots of America."

Pilots in the Schools is likely the first OBAP program a child is exposed to. "We encourage the kids to map out a goal, and we talk to them about how to attain that goal," Minter said in an interview at ALPA's Herndon office. "We try to help them understand that it takes time to accomplish their goal. 'Preparation meeting opportunity' is our definition of success. It can take as many as 15 years—about 10 years after your

U.S. Airline Pilots, per U.S. Census, 2002

Total:	124,825
African American:	2,065 (1.6%)
Male:	1,925 (1.5%)
Female:	140 (0.1%)

A student at the OBAP Summer Flight Academy prepares for his first solo.



OBAP



OBAP president
Capt. Karl Minter
(United).

first solo—to get to be a commuter pilot, which means a long-term involvement. We want them to realize that.”

But OBAP goes beyond the inspirational message. “We try to leverage the relations we have with business and industry to provide scholarships and internships, concrete ways to success,” Minter said. OBAP uses that support to provide scholarships to its Aviation Career Enrichment (ACE) camps and its Summer Flight Academies.

Each summer, 15–18 ACE camps around the country give 600–800 children aged 14–18 an introduction to “the charm of aviation,” Minter said. Students participate in aircraft orientation flights; field trips to aviation museums, space camps, air shows, and airline and military facilities; model aircraft building; and seminars.

Delta Air Lines, which Minter said “has been a huge supporter in Atlanta,” provides, for example, the Dream Flight in the Southeast region, flying a planeload of kids to Washington, D.C., for a tour of the National Air and Space Museum. Other major airline supporters are United, Continental, and Northwest—and not just out of the goodness of their heart.

“This is basically workforce development,” Minter said. “And it applies to a lot of other professions. If they can’t attract new people, they’ll have no longevity. It makes good business sense.”

Educational institutions—Delaware State, Texas State, Tennessee State, Florida Memorial, Western Michigan, Embry-Riddle—are also essential partners in these programs, providing instructors and/or facilities.

“The ACE camps have been hugely successful,” Minter said. “Then the kids become eligible to apply to Summer Flight Academy. We try to work with universities that have an airways science program that covers everything from maintenance to management.”

This year’s Summer Flight Academies, for kids 16–18, were in Atlanta, cosponsored by Delta, and at Delaware State University, which provided instructors, airplanes, and facilities.

Capt. Ron Milon, an A330 captain instructor at Northwest, was the academy’s director at Delaware State.

“We had 22 students,” Milon said in a telephone interview, “and 21 of them were able to solo in two weeks.” Most were alumni from an ACE camp, but not all, and some arrived with zero hours of flight time.

The Summer Flight Academy is a total-immersion experience, with 9 hours each day scheduled for sleep. “They

gine failure—“all the things a normal pilot is trained for,” Milon said. “And then they pull up on the ramp, the instructor gets out of the airplane, and they fly the airplane all by themselves. It’s very emotional each and every time one of those students lands that airplane safely after they fly around the pattern.”

And as he points out, there’s more to the Academy than just flying an airplane. “Even for those who decide they don’t want to be involved in aviation or be a pilot, we knew it would be re-



OBAP Summer Flight Academy students preflight a Piper PA-28 Cherokee.

wake up in the morning and go to breakfast and start talking about airplanes and go to ground school most of the day and fly,” Milon said. “It’s amazing what the average teenager can do when they concentrate on something for two weeks, when we get them secluded like that on campus, away from TV and cell phones. They’re smarter than most people think.”

Part of this year’s program was to get a taste of aviation’s wider world. Members of the Delaware Air National Guard dropped in with a Black Hawk helicopter, and on the weekend the students got a grand tour of Dover Air Force Base and its C-5As just down the road.

But the highlight is the solo.

The students get about 10 hours of flight training, learning the basic maneuvers, emergency procedures, what to do if it’s too windy or in case of en-

ally great for them to accomplish something like this. It gives them a lot of self-confidence and greater self-esteem to go forward.”

Minter agrees. “Kids go into the camp timid and shy, and when they graduate two weeks later, having accomplished their solo, they’re much more self-confident. We want to build on that self-confidence.”

So OBAP’s Project Aviator doesn’t stop there. Some Flight Academy graduates enter airways science programs at universities and the Air Force and Naval Academies.

OBAP is involved in career fairs, connecting its members with employers and giving them advice on applying and interviewing for a range of aviation jobs. It mentors them through a professional standards program and during training. It promotes internships with airlines, and Continental

Airlines has hired a significant number of OBAP members.

Minter is living proof of the value of programs like OBAP. "I grew up in Queens and didn't know anything about aviation when my dad took me out to a Negro Airmen International program, similar to ACE," he said. "I was bitten by the bug and graduated from Embry-Riddle. As a captain for United, I'm blessed to do what I do, day in and day out.


"I asked my dad once why he put me in the program, and he said, 'I



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thought you'd like it and it would keep you out of trouble.'

"And when St. Peter calls me and says, 'What did you do with your time on Earth?' I'll say, 'I helped somebody.'"

For additional information on OBAP or its programs, call 1-800-JET-OBAP or visit www.obap.org. 

Flying High After Summer Flight Academy

Kennita Ballard, a 17-year-old senior at Gar-Field Senior High School in Woodbridge, Va., wound up her 2 weeks at Delaware State's OBAP Summer Flight Academy with a successful solo flight, a raft of career dreams, and a mission.

"I don't know what I want to do in life," she said in an interview at ALPA, "so my best bet is to try everything out there. One reason I got interested in aviation is that it's a male-dominated field, and one thing I love to do is break the mold.

"Aviation is not strong on black female pilots, so I'm creating my own organization to promote them, called the Bessies," she said. "It's dedicated to Bessie Coleman [1892-1926], the first African-American woman certificated as an airplane pilot. It will be directed at African-American girls in elementary and middle school, while they're young enough to get on the math and science track that's necessary to become a pilot. I want to show them the whole range of jobs in the field of aviation.

"I conceived this idea at the Flight Academy. First, I'm going to form a team, then look for grants, which are available to support youth in world-changing organizations. I want this to be one of those."

In addition, OBAP President Karl Minter has asked Kennita to help develop national youth activities and programs for OBAP.

The hardest part of the Summer Flight Academy, Kennita said, "was the 24/7 attention to aviation. Every distraction that did not relate to aviation was removed. We had two two-hour breaks, and one was a mandatory study session. The classes were tough, but the teachers did a good job. You always had to be on-point, and it was often tense. Flying was tough, too,



Kennita Ballard

but for the flying, they kept emphasizing that we were to relax."

How did she become interested in aviation? "My mother, who makes all things possible," she replied. Her mother, Jeannette Owings-Ballard, has a friend who is a member of OBAP. "My father [Kenneth Ballard] has also been very supportive," Kennita said. "He was the one who told me not to worry when I was up in the air.

"The first thing we did, after they

taught us preflight procedures, was to fly an airplane. When I was little, I had flown an airplane at an ACE camp, a Cessna, but this was a Piper Warrior. I went up with the teacher and a flight partner, and we did a number of maneuvers, including a stall. But at those times, the teacher didn't take over. I knew what to do because he let me take care of it the first time it happened.

"School was regimented and organized, but they told us that what we learned there applies not only to aviation, it can apply to life. Like when we're in a situation that's extremely tense—if we relax, we can think better. And the dedication you put toward flying can be put toward other things as well.

"Because of the dedication for those two weeks, the majority of us soloed by the end. Now I want to learn the next level up."

Kennita knows she doesn't want to be an airline pilot—rather, she wants to fly for the Peace Corps, because of her interest in humanitarianism. And do more. "One of my college majors will definitely be education," she said. "I'm interested in the Japanese Exchange Teacher Program and ultimately foreign service education.

"Education and aviation—those are the two things I love. And I couldn't have found my love of aviation without the love and support of OBAP." 