

Helping Children's Dreams Take Flight

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Goldsboro, North Carolina

What child hasn't stared up at the sky, spotted the contrails of a plane flying high above the earth and dreamed about jetting to faraway lands or taking off on a big adventure — perhaps of growing up and piloting a supersonic airplane or futuristic spacecraft?

Children's fantasies and playtime can be a healthy escape and key to a healthy and active mind.

"Inadequate opportunity for children to play and for adolescents to quietly reflect and to daydream may have negative consequences — both for social-emotional well-being and for their ability to attend well to tasks," writes neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang.

But for children challenged by the burden of a debilitating illness — often unable to run, play and do the "kid stuff" that healthy children do — the ability to escape their reality, even briefly, can have a profoundly positive impact. It allows sick children to leave behind the scary world of a life-threatening illness and to just be kids.

That's the goal of Pilot for a Day, a program that started in 2015 as a partnership between Seymour Johnson Air Force Base (SJAFB) in Goldsboro, N.C., and Goldsboro Pediatrics, which provides care for the majority of children in Goldsboro, Wayne County and the surrounding area. The program enables a young child with a chronic disease to get in the cockpit of a simulator and experience the thrill of being a jet pilot.

"Our emotional well-being and mental health are very closely related to helping improve our physical health, especially for a child who is constantly dealing with days in the hospital, seemingly nonstop office visits and other challenges," said Dr. Katherine MacDonald, a physician with Goldsboro Pediatrics and the practice's liaison with SJAFB for Pilot for a Day.

Seymour Johnson, Wayne County's largest employer, is home to the 4th Fighter Wing, which has played a key role in every major U.S. military conflict in the last 60 years. The base employs more than 5,700 military members (including active duty and reservists) and 1,000 civilians.

The first eager participant in the Pilot for a Day program was 9-year-old Jeremiah Seaberry, who has severe sickle cell disease. Seaberry, who was grinning from ear to ear

when he showed up on base for his pilot training last April, has “the most dynamic and vibrant spirit you’ll ever see,” according to MacDonald.

Seaberry, who wasn’t expected to live past his first birthday, has had a “really rough time,” she said, adding that the Pilot for a Day program was an experience he’ll never forget.

“He may never be able to fly a plane on his own, but this will stay with him for the rest of his life,” MacDonald said.

“The whole medical group and the 4th Fighter Wing came together and made him the center of attention that day,” she said. “They had personalized patches for him, a helmet, his own flight suit, and it was all about Jeremiah that day. He came to our office a few weeks later for a regular office visit and was wearing his flight suit. His grandmother, who is his caregiver, even said he wore the suit to school one day for show and tell.”

On his big day, Seaberry was made an honorary member of the 334th Fighter Squadron, and was given the call sign “Swoosh,” a nod to his love of basketball. He also received a full mission briefing from Capt. Kat Frost, Pilot for a Day project officer, who described “Operation Slam Dunk” to take place by order of the president of the United States over a place called “Badguyland.”

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Swoosh’s crewmate for the day, Capt. Adam Luber, a pilot with the 334th Fighter Squadron, provided firsthand experience about the life of an Air Force fighter pilot. Luber took Seaberry on a tour of the flight line, showed him around the planes, and though he was only able to barely peek above the instrument panel, Seaberry sat in the cockpit of a F-15E fighter, which had his name and call sign temporarily affixed to the aircraft. He even took a walk on the wing. The day also included time in a flight simulator and a virtual reality parachute trainer.

“This program is for children who have experienced some kind of difficulty in their life, whether that’s because of illness or a disability,” Frost said. “We work with the 4th Medical Group and medical providers in the local community to identify children that qualify for and may be interested in this opportunity. Knowing we were able to give him these memories that might help him get through some of the tough times made it one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve ever had.”

To symbolize the completion of his pilot training, Seaberry was presented with his own

flight wings.

What did Swoosh think of his day? “Awesome,” he said.

MacDonald said that she hoped Seaberry would be the first of many children to take part in the Pilot for a Day program. Seaberry comes from a civilian family, but MacDonald said that the children of service members also would take part. “I hope it continues for many years to come,” she said.

“It’s an amazing opportunity to get these kids on base to actually see and touch the planes they see flying overhead every single day,” MacDonald noted. “It’s a lot of work, but the base has done an amazing job.” – CD
