

Gliding a family affair

By Michael Cooper-White for the Gettysburg Times

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Three family groups, the Ojhas of Rockville, Md., the Bartmanns of Brookville, Md., and the Harbolds of Washington, D.C., joined the 110-member Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association at the glider club's airport near Fairfield within the past two years.

Darryl Wheeler/Gettysburg Times

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families have struggled to pursue shared activities in which they can safely engage together. One that would come as a surprise to many has been taking place at the Mid-Atlantic Soaring Association's (M-ASA) airport near Fairfield.

Four members of the Bartmann family from northern Maryland are all learning to fly gliders. A native of South Africa, Theunis "Tim" Bartmann is joined in the motorless aviation pursuit by his son Cody and daughters Edie and Kayli.

It all began two years ago when the family sought a memorable way to celebrate Edie's 21st birthday. They appeared one day at M-ASA and took rides with long-time glider pilot and instructor David Weaver.

After their introductory flights "we all decided we wanted to learn to fly," Cody said, noting the three young Bartmanns made their first solo flights in reverse age order, with Kayli at 15 being the first to fly without an instructor in the back seat.

At times two of the Bartmanns have been airborne simultaneously in gliders rented to members by M-ASA. Kayli described the thrill of coming in for a landing simultaneously with her brother and then her sister.

The Fairfield airport has two parallel grass runways in addition to the center paved airstrip and it is not uncommon for two gliders to be on landing approach at the same time.

The elder Bartmann travels frequently as a consultant and has not been able to fly as often as his children. But Tim expects to solo soon as all four of the fledgling aviators pursue their private pilot glider licenses.

“We talk about flying all the time at home,” Cody said, describing life in the Bartmann household.

Another Maryland family joined the 110-member M-ASA flying club about the same time as the Bartmanns.

Growing up in the Himalayan mountains of eastern India, Roopesh Ojha always looked to the skies and dreamed of flying.

An astronomer with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Ojha said his daughter Lara was initially most interested in learning to fly, but son Rohan soon expressed eagerness to take glider lessons, too.

“We like the club model,” the elder Ojha said, describing M-ASA’s ethos wherein members pitch in to complete all tasks required during busy weekend operations when 40 or more flights sometimes take place on long summer days.

“People give so much of their time and expertise,” Ojha said of his fellow club members, pointing especially to the all-volunteer instructor corps of highly experienced pilots who patiently teach others to fly week after week.

Rohan Ojha, 15, said among other things he loves about flying gliders is “it’s so quiet” in the motorless crafts.

His sister Lara, 17, said she also enjoys the quietness and unparalleled views of the countryside in south central Pennsylvania and northern Maryland.

The high school senior who has applied to 13 colleges is convinced what she’s learned from glider training will help prepare her for a career as an engineer.

New student pilots are paired with one of M-ASA’s 10 FAA-certified flight instructors by the club’s chief instructor, Catherine Williams of Laporte, Pa.

Williams, who has been flying gliders for over 50 years after gaining her license as a teenager, is president of the national Women Pilots Soaring Association. As M-ASA’s head instructor she tries to match compatible personalities to ensure a positive learning experience.

Convinced father-daughter relationships would not get in the way of training, Williams assigned two women to their father instructors.

“I wanted her to fly and she wanted her dad as her instructor,” Rich Matheus said of his daughter Linda.

Also teaching his daughter Stella to fly gliders is instructor Paul Szostak.

Another father-daughter flying pair are Michael and Annabelle Harbold of Washington, D.C. Annabelle said her dad’s experience from preceding her in flight training was especially helpful as she prepared for the challenging FAA written exam all pilots must pass prior to gaining a license.

After her first solo this summer, Annabelle was treated to the customary M-ASA ritual when a full bucket of ice water is poured over the head of the new pilot, just as occurs after major sports championship games. “I really got all wet,” she said.

More Women Gliding

Glider lessons are less expensive than learning to fly engine-powered aircraft. M-ASA keeps its glider rental rates as low as possible to make learning to fly affordable.

Through adult member donations and a scholarship fund, half-price memberships and subsidized lessons are made available to young aviators.

Even more than the overall world of aviation, glider flying historically has been overwhelmingly a male activity.

Williams is one of a small number of nationally recognized female glider pilots and lead flight instructors. But if the current trend at M-ASA is any indication, the picture is changing.

After a recent weekend day, veteran instructor Lance Nuckolls wrote an email to all club members expressing his enthusiasm upon seeing an all-women crew “prepping and taking all of the club’s two-seat gliders to the flight line.”

“I was so happy to see that and became encouraged that we will see more and more young women (and men) become a part of soaring,” Nuckolls said.

Amid COVID, Community Service

When the coronavirus outbreak began last spring, M-ASA’s board shut down operations for several weeks despite the fact aviation activities were never curtailed, even when Pennsylvania was in the “red zone.” A primary reason beyond the need to keep critical airborne operations flowing was pilot currency is critical to safety.

Since piloting skills can become rusty relatively quickly, M-ASA's leaders reopened operations under strict prevention protocols.

During dual flights with an instructor and student on board, both wear masks. The gliders are disinfected after each use. Records are kept of all personnel present at the airport on a given day.

To maximize safety, M-ASA has also temporarily suspended guest sight-seeing rides.

Only prospective members who indicate serious intent to join the club and begin lessons are offered an introductory ride.

While a majority of M-ASA members live outside Adams County, and many make long commutes to the airfield, the club has a strong commitment to be a good neighbor in the local community.

As summer began and the pandemic's impacts included an increase in families with food insecurity, M-ASA members launched fundraising to support the Fairfield Ruth's Harvest provision of meals.

M-ASA's president, Michael Higgins, of Winchester, West Virginia, is pleased at the club's growth and members' commitment to ensure safe operations and serve the greater community.

"We've had a robust year, which is surprising during COVID. We operate on sunny days in the open air. People recognize it's a low-risk outdoor activity," he said.