

Deaf, blind student gets to fly plane



Katie Inman climbed into the cockpit of the Piper Warrior airplane and put on a thick pair of headphones. The plane roared to life and began taxiing down the runway for takeoff.

With her right hand, Katie guided the nose of the plane into the air.

With her left, she reached in the back seat of the four-seater plane where her interpreter, Ashley, signed instructions into her hand.

Katie, 15, is deaf and blind. On Tuesday, she flew an airplane.

The event was coordinated by Linwood Nooe, the director of Operation P.R.O.P., a nonprofit organization that offers free flights to people with disabilities.

Nooe, a former private pilot, founded the organization in 2010 with the intention of exposing people to aviation, especially those who may not have ever been able to fly in an airplane.

"When you get in an airplane, you forget about everything else," he said. "That's something I wanted to share with people. It doesn't matter what disability you have, you can still fly in a plane."

Katie, who lives with her family in Atlantic Beach, was born blind as a result of a genetic disorder that causes her optic nerve to atrophy. Both her mother and her grandmother suffer from vision loss as a result of the same disorder.

This condition eventually led to her hearing loss when she was about 8 years

old.

Since Katie was born with her hearing, she has always been able to speak. Now, however, Katie "hears" mainly through tactile sign language - a form of sign language used by Helen Keller that is signed into Katie's hand so she can feel the words.

In March, Katie had her first cochlear implant, so for the first time in years, she has been able to begin relying tentatively on her hearing again, said her mother, Tracie Inman.

Katie is scheduled for her second cochlear implant on Thursday, so her hearing is expected to continue to improve.

Nooe first offered the thin, vivacious brunette the opportunity to fly when they met at a convention for deaf-blind people.

Katie readily agreed, and preparation for the flight began.

"She has absolutely no fear," said her father, Kevin Inman. "It's incredible."

Katie was Nooe's first participant who was blind and deaf, but he is hopeful she won't be the last.

He said he hopes to work with the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind to establish a way for students to learn to fly at the Northeast Florida Regional Airport.

Katie is a sophomore at FSDB. She said her friends from school would like to hear about her flight, "but they'll get really jealous."

Pilot Donna Tostevin, assistant flight chief instructor at Florida Aviation Career Training, sat in the dual-control cockpit and oversaw the 15-minute flight. She let Katie help guide the plane during takeoff and landing, and once the plane leveled out at about 2,600 feet in the air, she took her hands off her set of controls.

"I said, 'OK, Katie, you're flying now,'" Tostevin said after the flight.

Tostevin communicated instructions to Katie through Ashley Dalia, a fourth grade teacher at FSDB who has worked with Katie for years.

The small plane circled St. Augustine, and Dalia told Katie when they flew over landmarks like the Castillo de San Marcos, the Bridge of Lions and Katie's school.

"It was fun!" Katie said afterward, standing on the red-tipped wing of the plane.

"I still wanted to go higher," she said. "Maybe next time we'll do more tricks."

Her mother, Tracie Inman, said she is so thankful for people like Nooe who help people with disabilities do things they're often told they can't.

She said Katie's experience will send a positive message to the students at FSDB.

"It doesn't matter what the obstacles are, there's always a way to overcome them," she said. "I always tell Katie the sky is the limit."

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