

Hometown News

Witham Field welcomes Indiantown YMCA children

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Group toured control tower and hangers as guests of Stuart Jet Center

By Donald Rodrigue
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WITHAM FIELD - Almost three dozen children from the Indiantown YMCA oohed and aahed as they toured the Martin County airport recently as the invited guests of Stuart Jet Center.

Ranging from 5 to 14 years old, the chattering and giggling group came to Witham Field July 16 as part of the YMCA's "Why You Matter" program, a cooperative effort between the organization and area businesses and community leaders to show youngsters the broad variety of career options available. Stuart Jet Center line service technician Jeremy Baber served as their tour guide, accompanying them aboard their school bus throughout the airport property, offering educational and historical tidbits along the way.

"That runway over there was painted up as an aircraft carrier during World War II," he said. "The pilots practiced landing with a tail hook, just like they do on an aircraft carrier."

The excitement level on the bus increased significantly when they pulled up in front of the 84-foot-tall control tower. A few expressed fear of going to the top of Martin County's highest structure, but they all rushed to the doors as soon as they opened. Once at the top, they crowded into the octagon-shaped control room to listen as air traffic controllers Al Schafer and Forrest Fenton explained the inner workings of the modern tower, which was built in 2000 and utilizes the latest in weather detection and aircraft tracking technology.

They all began scampering for a better view when the pair informed them a jet was taxiing down the runway in preparation for take-off.

"He's about to start rolling," Mr. Schafer said. "When his nose comes up, it doesn't look like it, but he'll be doing more than a hundred miles an hour."

Many of them strained to see over the desks and equipment lining the windows as the small jet quickly lifted off and soared into the sky.

Mr. Fenton demonstrated a \$5,000 light gun to the group, a device used by controllers to direct approaching aircraft or airport vehicles that have lost radio contact. He told the children that he began his flight control career in the Air Force and encouraged them to consider the same path in the future.

The group's plans to view the LifeStar rescue helicopter and talk to its crew members were suddenly cancelled when the aircraft was forced to respond to an emergency call.

That didn't seem to affect Indiantown Middle School student Jesmarie "Jessie" Rivero's perspective of the trip. The 13-year-old said the airport tour was "awesome" and one of the best parts was seeing the LifeStar chopper take off.

"I learned a lot of new things," she said. "I want to work here now. I know that I need to study math and a lot of science to do so."

Another Indiantown Middle School student, Troy Freeman, 12, said the whole airport experience was "cool," especially getting to see airplanes take off and land while in the control tower.

"I want to be an air force pilot when I grow up," he said, adding that he was a fan of the movie "Top Gun."

Port St. Lucie resident Cindy Maisonnueve, the YMCA's summer camp director and head of the Reads! Literacy tutoring program, said the Indiantown group has been traveling quite a bit this summer.

"They were so excited because this is the first year they have gotten to take field trips on a regular basis," she said. "They have also visited the Kennedy Space Center and the Museum of Science and Discovery in Fort Lauderdale this year."