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Florida Pilot Encourages Diversity in Aviation by Inspiring Kids Across the Country to Soar

<http://www.people.com/article/mike-mckenzie-vision-of-flight>



MIKE MCKENZIE

Pilot Mike McKenzie first fell in love with flying planes at 12 years old when his parents sent him to the Brooklyn School of Aviation as a birthday present. Today, he teaches children how to soar beyond their wildest dreams.

"I've always had that passion for flying," McKenzie, 57, tells PEOPLE. "I came [to Brooklyn] from Jamaica, West Indies, as a kid, and from that very first time aboard an aircraft, I just knew it was something I really wanted to do."

McKenzie, who is the former owner of Wheels to Wings Transportation, now dedicates his time to [Vision of Flight](#), a central Florida-based non-profit organization he founded in 2012 that introduces students to careers available in aeronautics.

The pilot, who lives in Orlando, discovered a need for the program when he visited airports and noticed a lack of diversity among those flying airplanes and working in control towers.

"I didn't see a lot of demographics represented," he says. "I didn't see many women pilots or African-Americans or Hispanics – I didn't see that diversity that I felt should be there.

"I started questioning why that is and I found out that it was really just lack of awareness."

There also seemed to be a lack of programming available to students, so he made it his mission to bring kids together to allow them to "learn from each other."

"[Flying planes] is not for any one ethnicity," McKenzie says. "It's for everybody."

McKenzie, who served in the U.S. Navy for four years, says he was inspired by the Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African-American fighter pilots during World War II. He went on to honor the group with a monument at the Orlando Science Center, which was unveiled in November 2013.

"We had a very big, successful unveiling of it on Veterans Day and that kind of put everything into perspective," he says.

McKenzie's efforts that day helped raise awareness about Vision of Flight, which he says has impacted "over 10,000 kids" who have participated in its flight simulation experience.



Vision of Flight is now part of the [Share Fair Nation's STEMosphere](#), a nationwide tour that provides hands-on learning opportunities for students.

Along with the national tour, Vision of Flight also works with the Boy Scouts of America. Scouts have the opportunity to earn their Aviation Merit Badge by taking a flight in an airplane, performing a preflight inspection and visiting an airport.

And Vision of Flight has expanded its reach to partner with [Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University](#) – the two institutions work together to provide

online coursework and hands-on resources to increase awareness and interest in the field of aeronautics.

"There aren't enough kids tracking towards these types of careers, and we're in need of people to build out the critical jobs, such as pilots, mechanics and technology developers," he says. "We steer them towards these fields and keep the mentoring going so they're constantly building new relationships with folks that can assist in granting scholarships, internships and allowing them to be exposed to these careers."

McKenzie has seen the positive influence his organization has had on kids over the years, as some of the first students involved in Vision of Flight are now in college.

"The first [student] is over at Embry-Riddle right now and she is studying astrophysics with a minor in propulsion," he says. "And this is the same young girl that boasts about the fact that Vision of Flight gave her the opportunity to see beyond her horizons. She didn't think this was something she could accomplish. I don't think there's much more to ask for than that."

Vision of Flight is looking to broaden the organization's resources by implementing the fundraising campaign, [Operation: Vision One Aircraft](#), which he established to raise funds to purchase an aircraft dubbed "Vision One."

"We can accomplish this if we just work together," he says. "We have to empower them with the tools, so that they can have a shot at success."

Reporting by Jessica Fecteau