

RAISING EAGLES

PILOT SHARES HIS LOVE OF FLYING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

By DOLORES FOX CIARDELLI

Bob Leuten, 74, remembers looking up at the sky when he was a boy in Ohio.

"I saw a single-engine airplane and said, 'Look at that! Mom! Dad! Look at that!'" he recalled.

His parents saw danger, but Leuten, now a Pleasanton resident, went on to a lifetime of piloting his own aircraft — nine so far — and a career in aviation insurance.

Leuten, who currently owns a two-seat, red-and-white Super Decathlon, shares his love of flying with youngsters ages 8-17 through the Young Eagles program of the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA), based in Oshkosh, Wisc. He has taken 605 youngsters on flights since 1999 to introduce them to the joys of small airplanes and piloting.

"I let them take the controls if the conditions are right," Leuten said. "I have dual flight control. And I'm a certified flight instructor."

The local EAA chapter contacts youth clubs and centers to put out the word when they are hosting a Young Eagles airlift, usually with five or six airplanes and pilots participating.

"Parents can sign up on the website in advance or can drop in and fill out the form," Leuten said. "Then they wait in line and go up with the pilot."

Pilots are carefully screened, he noted, with background checks.

"The flight is 10 to 20 minutes in the air," he said. "It always takes off and lands at the same airport, and flights are only conducted in pristine, non-turbulent, great visibility weather. We want it to be a good experience."

Leuten recalled only one incident where a student became nervous but said he was able to calm them down quickly.

"Kids are fearless, and they all love it," he said.



ERIKA ALVERO

Pleasanton resident Bob Leuten has been piloting airplanes for decades. Since 1999, he has been working to introduce kids and teens to the joys of aviation through the national Young Eagles program.

His most memorable Young Eagles flight was in his Cessna Cardinal with a teenager named Michael Mainiero in 2011.

"He was 14 or 15 at the time, and he has gone on to become a pilot," Leuten said.

Leuten became his flight instructor, and Mainiero soloed on his 16th birthday, the minimum age. Then he earned his private pilot's license on his 17th birthday, also the minimum.

"He was so anxious to learn everything he could about aviation, and he was a natural talent," Leuten said. "Now he is flying charter jets for a charter company, earning his living as a pilot."

Leuten pursued ham radio as a youth and served in the Army Signal Corps. While at Fort Sill, Okla., in 1965, he visited its Red Leg Flying Club where a flight confirmed his interest in exploring the skies. By the next year he had earned his private pilot's license.

"I have been a pilot since 1966 continuously, except for the one year I served in Vietnam," Leuten said.

Two years ago, he received the FAA Wright Brothers "Master Pilot" Award for

flying a total of 50 years.

Leuten tries to participate in the Young Eagles program at least once a month, time and weather permitting. A scholarship swimmer at Bowling Green State University, Leuten is still a competitive swimmer, working out three to four days a week and competing in two to three swim meets a year. He

was recently recognized with a U.S. Masters Swimming Top 10 Award in the men's 200-meter backstroke, seventh in the nation in his age group.

Leuten and his wife Sally moved to Pleasanton from San Mateo four years ago to be near their two sons and their families, including four granddaughters.

"Sally is kind of a white-knuckle flier but every July we fly from Liver-

more to the town of Columbia (in the Sierra foothills), which has a hokey Fourth of July parade," Leuten said. "We walk into town, watch the parade and fly home."

He often flies other pilots to pick up their airplanes, flies to visit friends, and takes his 16-year-old granddaughter Jasmine to visit her other grandparents in the northern part of the state. He also does training flights and gives instruction in others' airplanes. And he especially enjoys flying solo to the EAA conventions held in Oshkosh, slowly making his way across the country in two days.

Leuten said one reason for his involvement with the Young Eagles program is the shortage of pilots in the country.

"One of the goals of the program is getting children interested in aviation and the sciences," he said. "We have a severe pilot shortage in the United States — the airlines are screaming for pilots with experience. This program kind of helps fill the need for pilots."

The Young Eagles program began in 1992 and has flown more than 2 million young people worldwide. For more information, visit www.eaa.org. ■

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Above: Leuten has given more than 600 flight experiences through the Young Eagles program and also enjoys flying with his 16-year-old granddaughter Jasmine, shown here three years ago.

(Contributed photo).

Right: Leuten takes a quick flight over the Tri-Valley last Friday. (Photo by Erika Alvero).

