



Peter Underwood, center, returns to Washington with teenagers and their chaperones after a four-day goal-building trip to the Air Force Academy.

Learning That the Sky's the Limit

Ex-Pilot Teaches Teens About 'Sweat Equity' on Trip to Air Force Academy

By Amy Porter Munster
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For 57 District youngsters, it was the ultimate field trip: a ride on the chartered jet President Clinton used during his campaign followed by four days at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado.

The wacky part was how they got it: from a middle-aged, suburban, former fighter pilot they never heard of who happened to have two late-blooming children and a nagging social conscience.

Peter Underwood, 43, now a commercial pilot and schools liaison officer for the Air Force, calls it just "checking six."

That's fighter-pilot slang for taking a periodic look back for enemy aircraft.

As he tells it, he was struck one day by the extent to which his own son and daughter, ages 18 and 21, seemed totally "goal-less."

If youngsters in the affluent suburbs of Washington could display such lack of purpose, Underwood wondered, how could people expect disadvantaged youngsters in the city to keep focused.

So borrowing from a volunteer program of the now-defunct Eastern Airlines, where he used to work, Underwood vowed to use his aviation connections to do something.

It wasn't his first flash of conscience.

A year ago, he flew a plane to Florida with 35 tons of food and medical supplies for victims of Hurricane Andrew. This time, he proposed to charter a plane and take some D.C. teenagers to his alma mater: the academy where recruiters once told him he didn't have a chance at being admitted.

"I was told I was too fat, too slow, too dumb to get in," he recalled. "I graduated in the top 23 percent of my class."

The lesson of a journey to the academy for bright teenagers with big dreams but little money would be that "there are goals out there. All it costs you is sweat equity," Underwood said.

With that, he dubbed the program "Reach for Tomorrow" and set out to market it to D.C. junior and senior high school students.

But getting the maiden voyage off the ground soon became Underwood's big sweat. In all its history, the academy had only opened its doors for pre-college students in a summer session for gifted teenagers selected from across the nation.

"I looked at this and I said, 'They're only targeting a group of kids that have already cut the mustard.'" Underwood said, figuring he was in for a fight.

As it turned out, the academy was not a problem. Once Underwood convinced the superintendent that the idea was "dynamite," academy cadets arranged the agenda, the transportation around Colorado and four nights' lodging in the dorms.



Glad to be home, Rasheba Eason and Tiffanie Turner, left, run for the bus. Below, Javan Steadham says goodbye to the charter flight crew, Theresa Terry, Laura Putty and pilot Butch Fisher.



The hard part was getting out of Washington. Underwood's employer, American Airlines, offered to transport the group for \$41,000, or about \$575 apiece for the 57 teenagers and 14 chaperones, whose participation was the academy's only demand.

But that was more money than Underwood could raise in donations. Searching several months for a more reasonable rate, Underwood settled on Dallas-based Express One Inc., which offered a chartered DC-9 jet for \$25,000. The executive vice president of Express One is Gen. Charlie Hamm, former superintendent of the Air Force Academy.

Help funneled in from seven corporate sponsors to pay for publicity and other expenses. But days before takeoff, Underwood was still doing some nail-biting until the Mayor's Youth Initiatives Office agreed to chip in for the airfare.

The teenagers, many of whom had never flown in a plane, left eight days ago and returned on Saturday.

Each was paired with a minority cadet, and all ate meals, attended classes and slept in the dorms as if they were cadets themselves. They also attended a dance and played a basketball tournament against the cadets.

Minutes after their arrival home, Javan Steadham, 17, a senior at St. James Prep, was still talking about how his cadet escort took him to the library and showed him all the in-

formation on college scholarships, making it sound a lot easier than he ever had imagined.

Others talked of the dramatic change of environs. One kept saying, "Where is everybody? There's so much space. I just didn't know there was any place like this," said Douglas Carter, deputy director of the Mayor's Youth Initiative.

But many chatted more with a reporter about their view of how tough it is for incoming freshmen going through initiation, serving meals to upper classmen before they can eat and learning to refer to everyone as "sir" or "ma'am."

"They can't talk or blink," said Patricia Szymore, 15, a 10th-grader in junior ROTC at Wilson High School. "I'd want to go if I didn't have to be a freshman."

But John Bruce, a senior at Wilson, spoke of it as just more evidence of the sweat equity that Underwood had been talking about. His escort, for example, did not have the grades to be accepted into the academy, so he went to prep school on a scholarship to get ready, he said.

After four days, Carter said, it was interesting to see the many connections the youngsters had established in a place so far away and so different from home; some even cried a they were boarding the plane home.

The cadets seemed to benefit too, he said. "I was great to watch the cadets get as much as they gave and the kids get as much as they gave to learning about life's options and goals."