

# Liftoff for C students

## Pilot tries to help them soar

By Christine Montgomery  
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**P**eter Underwood goes after the ones in the middle. They're not the really bad students; they're not the ones excelling. They're the C students who don't recognize the value of algebra, or worse, an education. He goes after them and gives them a reason to try.

"When you hit about 12, you enter a phase in your life. I call it a 'mental pause,'" says Mr. Underwood, founder of Reach for Tomorrow (RFT), a nonprofit organization that uses hands-on methods to give youngsters a motivational kick in the pants.

"How you emerge from that phase unscathed depends on the people you bump into along the way."

Forget the bump. Even a nudge from Mr. Underwood, a pilot for American Airlines from Fairfax, is enough to give most teens and preteens a clearer view of their future.

Since 1993, he's taken about 700 area high school students through his program, which includes a weeklong trip to one of several military academies and colleges. Once there, the students fly planes, steer ships, work in scientific labs and spend a lot of time talking with cadets and college students.

They see that military academies offer a free education to qualified students — although Mr. Underwood, himself a graduate of the Air Force Academy, is quick to point out that he is in no way recruiting. If they're motivated to do good work in high school, those same kids can go to a state or private institution on scholarships, he says.

"They'll be in a position to be competitive for any kind of school. One of the reasons I use the academies is because I don't know where else I could find a large student body that lives by an honor code and talks about issues like character, honor, integrity and ethics — things critical for character development," he says.

In fact, the military code resembles RFT's: attitude, attendance and achievement. Those are the



Peter Underwood (top), Reach for Tomorrow founder, tells students what is expected of them. Above, participants board a C-130 military plane that will fly them to the Merchant Marine Academy.

group's goals for each student, Mr. Underwood, 47, says.

Recently, RFT took 24 Washington area students to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y. Mr. Underwood flew with them on a C-130 military plane piloted by members of the New York Air National Guard. At Kings Point, some of the students found they had a lot in common with the plebes they met, including the need for financial help to attend college.

Marie Marin, 13, of Reston, was one of the youngsters on the trip. After the visit, she said she wanted to attend the academy, even though it looked like hard work.

"In the end I get a good job and then I can have a good life," she said.

High schoolers hear the message of why school is essential much better from someone close to their age who has a future in front of them full of promise, Mr. Underwood says.

"They can tell the guys, 'This is how you get there,'" he says. "We're motivating them to see the justification for things like chemistry or physics."

The best part of the RFT program — aside from its founder's enthusiasm — is the cost: It's free to the youngsters. Corporations such as MCI, McDonnell Douglas and TRW pick up the tab for travel, meals and supplies.

United Airlines recently donated flights for more than 160 area students to visit the University of California at San Diego. The flight attendants donated their time. Mobil Oil donated fuel. About 50 adult volunteers help Mr. Underwood run the program in school systems throughout the metropolitan area.

Students, chosen by school administrators, are enrolled in the program before they begin their freshman year of high school. They need only to have achieved a C average, scored in the top 40 percent of their class on standardized tests and put in several hours of community service.

RFT has become so popular that occasionally school administrators try to enroll their top students for the chance to spend a week with Mr. Underwood and his entourage of volunteers.

That, he says, misses the point. He wants to reach the youngsters who are aren't on the college track in order to get them on it.

"Essentially, these kids aren't living up to their potential," Mr. Underwood says of these middle children. "I don't care what they do — if they go to an academy or not. Just as long as they do something positive."

