

Soaring Dreams: 100 Black Men of Greater Florida's Aviation Academy Continues to Inspire Future Aviators

Over 75 youth take flight at the 7th Annual Aviation Academy in Gainesville, Florida

On a warm June evening at Santa Fe College's Kika Silva Pla Planetarium, the excited chatter of over 75 young voices filled the air. These weren't just any students gathering for a typical summer program—these were the voices of possible future pilots, aerospace engineers, and aviation professionals participating in the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida's 7th Annual Aviation Academy. "What They See Is What They'll Be" isn't just a motto for the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida, GNV, Inc.—it's a promise being fulfilled one student at a time. This year's two-day aviation event, held June 27-28, 2025, represents the continuing evolution of a program that has become a cornerstone of aviation education and inspiration for underserved youth in North Central Florida.

A Legacy of Leadership and Mentorship

To understand the significance of this aviation academy, one must first appreciate the rich history of the organization behind it. The 100 Black Men of America traces its roots back to 1963 in New York City, when a group of concerned African American professionals came together with a simple yet powerful vision: to improve the quality of life and enhance educational opportunities for African Americans and in particular, young Americans across the nation.

What started as a local initiative has grown into a formidable national force, with over 116 chapters and more than 10,000 members who collectively mentor over 125,000 youth annually. The organization operates under four pillars—mentoring, education, health and wellness, and economic empowerment—with leadership development serving as an overlay to all programs.

Gainesville did not have a chapter until **July 2020**, when community leaders Jamar Hebert and Matt Bowman chartered **100 Black Men of Greater Florida GNV** in the wake of nationwide calls for racial justice. "Now is the time to make a difference," Hebert told local media at the group's inaugural meeting in Gainesville's Martin Luther King Center. Their goal: pair seasoned professionals with young people hungry for guidance, and build a pipeline to college, careers, and civic leadership.

The Gainesville chapter, formally established in March 2021, represents the newest generation of this storied organization's expansion. Thirty-six founding members from diverse professional backgrounds—business leaders, educators, law enforcement officers, and yes, pilots—came together with a shared commitment to making a meaningful difference in the local community. The mayors of Gainesville, Newberry, and Alachua proclaimed March 27, 2021, as "100 Black Men of Greater Florida Gainesville Day," recognizing the chapter's potential to transform lives.

A Weekend of Wonder: Inside the 7th Annual Aviation Academy

business management, participants learn that the sky truly is the limit when it comes to career opportunities.

The information stations set up during the academy delved into crucial topics:

- **Aerodynamics and Flight Principles:** Students learned the science behind how aircraft stay aloft, turning abstract physics concepts into tangible understanding.
- **Weather and Flight Patterns:** Understanding meteorology's role in aviation safety and operations.
- **Drone Technology:** Recognizing the growing importance of unmanned aerial systems in both commercial and recreational contexts.
- **Career Pathways:** Detailed information about educational requirements, career trajectories, and opportunities in various aviation fields.

Some of the Academy's best evangelists are alumni. At the **2024** edition, then-fifteen-year-old **Regan Hollinger** beamed to WCJB reporters: "My favorite part was flying over the Gator Stadium... being in the air is amazing."



Community Impact and Ripple Effects

The success of the Aviation Academy extends far beyond the individual participants. Parents, many of whom had never considered aviation as a viable career path for their children, left with new perspectives and possibilities. The visibility of the event, covered by local media outlets like WCJB, helps normalize the idea of young people from Gainesville's diverse communities pursuing aviation careers.

The members and supporters of the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida demonstrate through their volunteer efforts that success isn't just about personal achievement—it's about lifting others as you climb. This philosophy permeates every aspect of the Aviation Academy, from the meticulous planning that goes into organizing the event to the patient mentoring provided during hands-on activities.

Local partnerships have been crucial to the program's success. Running a zero-tuition camp with 75+ participants is a logistical puzzle solved by an eclectic sponsor list. **University Air Center** waives aircraft rental margins and avgas surcharges for discovery flights; **Santa Fe College** donates planetarium time; **Alachua County Sheriff's Office** provides officers who double as career mentors; and area vendors—from **Donut NV's** food truck to local DJ DoubleA—turn the ramp into a festival of possibility. Businesses also underwrite thirty-five annual "Ground School Grants" that cover online PPL coursework for interested teenagers. These partnerships also help students understand that their local

This year's academy exemplified how far the program has come. The event began Friday evening at the Kika Silva Pla Planetarium of Santa Fe College, where students were immersed in the science and wonder of flight. But this wasn't a passive learning experience—it was designed to be interactive, engaging, and above all, inspiring.

The academy featured an impressive array of aviation professionals, including experts in commercial, private, military, and drone piloting. Representatives from prestigious organizations added weight to the proceedings: the United States Navy, Alachua County Sheriff's Office, and Gainesville Fire Rescue all sent representatives to share their expertise and experiences. The academy structure and activities are led by the Aviation Academy founder, **David Bridges**. David is an experienced 747 airline captain and member of the local chapter of the organization.

"Few industries integrate math, physics, teamwork, and adventure in the way that aviation does," says chapter president **Matt Bowman**, himself a former Naval aviation professional. The Academy started modestly in 2019 with 30 kids touring Gainesville Regional Airport. Today it is a two-day immersion that alternates between earth-bound theory and airborne practice.

Saturday's activities moved from theory to practice as participants traveled to the University Air Center at Gainesville Regional Airport. Here, the magic truly happened—students who had perhaps never been closer to an aircraft than looking up at contrails got to experience the thrill of flight firsthand. Under the careful supervision of

certified pilots and instructors, young people took to the skies, many for the first time in their lives. Across 4 hours, professional pilots, **David Bridges, Clint Cunningham, Jermaine Medley, and Ramone Hemphill**, flew more than 48 flights carrying the 75+ wide-eyed enthusiasts into the Gainesville air to experience the wonders of flight. The flight team flew a variety of aircraft for the discovery flights. David Bridges piloted a Cessna 172M, Jermaine Medley piloted a Piper Warrior, Clint Cunningham piloted a Piper PA-28 Archer and Ramone Hemphill piloted a Piper PA-28 Archer



Beyond the Cockpit: A Holistic Approach to Aviation Education

What sets the 100 Black Men's Aviation Academy apart is its comprehensive approach to aviation education. The program doesn't just focus on piloting—it introduces students to the vast ecosystem of aviation careers. From aircraft maintenance to air traffic control, from aerospace engineering to aviation

community is invested in their success. The sponsors also include Coca Cola of Florida, McDonald's of Gainesville, and Career Communications Group.



Innovation in Aviation Education

One of the most innovative aspects of recent Aviation Academies has been the integration of modern technology into the learning experience. Flight simulators, once the exclusive domain of professional pilot training, now serve as accessible entry points for young people to experience the basics of flight without leaving the ground. Virtual reality experiences allow students to explore aircraft systems in detail, while drone piloting workshops introduce them to the rapidly evolving field of unmanned aviation.

The Aviation Academy is only one gear in a year-round machine. Chapter volunteers tutor math at Howard Bishop Middle School, host quarterly financial-literacy boot camps, and pair mentees with industry apprenticeships. The aviation thread weaves throughout: field trips to Lakeland's SUN 'n FUN Expo, virtual-reality sim sessions at Gainesville Public Library, and scholarship prep for Civil Air Patrol cadet glider camps.

Overcoming Barriers and Building Bridges

The Aviation Academy directly addresses several barriers that have historically prevented underrepresented communities from entering aviation careers. Cost is perhaps the most significant obstacle—traditional flight training can easily exceed \$80,000 for a commercial pilot license. By introducing young people to aviation early and connecting them with scholarship opportunities, mentorship programs, and alternative training paths, the academy builds awareness and helps families understand that aviation careers are financially achievable.

Equally important is the psychological barrier of belonging. When young people don't see anyone who looks like them in cockpits or control towers, it's easy to assume those careers aren't for them. The Aviation Academy shatters these assumptions by surrounding participants with successful Black aviation professionals, from military pilots to commercial airline captains, from aircraft mechanics to aerospace engineers.



Measuring Success: More Than Numbers

While the impressive attendance of over 75 youth at this year's academy is certainly worth celebrating, the true measure of success lies in the long-term impact on participants' lives. Alumni of previous academies have gone on to pursue aerospace engineering degrees, enroll in flight training programs, and join military aviation programs. Some have even returned as volunteers, completing the circle of mentorship that defines the 100 Black Men's approach.

The program's success can also be measured in the expanding network of support it has created. Parents who initially knew little about aviation have become advocates for their children's aerospace ambitions. Teachers report increased interest in STEM subjects among academy participants. Local aviation businesses have begun actively recruiting from the diverse talent pool the academy helps cultivate.



Looking to the Horizon: The Future of the Aviation Academy

As the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida looks ahead, plans are already underway to expand and enhance future Aviation Academics. Discussions include:

- **Year-round programming:** Moving beyond the annual two-day event to offer monthly aviation workshops and mentoring sessions.
- **Scholarship fund development:** Creating a dedicated fund to help academy alumni pursue flight training and aviation degrees.
- **Corporate partnerships:** Engaging major airlines and aerospace companies to provide internships and career pathways for participants.
- **Advanced training opportunities:** Offering ground school preparation and introductory flight training for serious students.
- **Regional expansion:** Sharing the academy model with other 100 Black Men chapters across Florida and beyond.

A Call to Action for the Aviation Community

The success of the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida's Aviation Academy offers a blueprint for how the general aviation community can actively work to increase diversity and accessibility in aviation. For aviation professionals reading this, consider how you might contribute:

- Volunteer as a mentor or speaker at future academies
- Offer discovery flights or facility tours to youth groups

- Advocate for diversity initiatives within your organization
- Support scholarship funds for underrepresented students pursuing aviation careers
- Share your aviation journey to inspire the next generation

Conclusion: Dreams Taking Flight

As the rain showers moved in on Saturday, June 28, 2025, and the last of the young participants reluctantly left the University Air Center, the 7th Annual Aviation Academy came to a close. But for these 75-plus youth, a new journey was just beginning. They had seen with their own eyes that the sky is not a limit but a vast expanse of opportunity. They had met pilots who looked like them, engineers who shared their backgrounds, and mentors who believed in their potential.

The 100 Black Men of Greater Florida's Aviation Academy represents more than just an educational program—it's a movement to democratize aviation and ensure that the future of flight reflects the full diversity of our communities. As Matt Bowman, the organization's Co-Founder and President, eloquently stated, "We are trying to help them become creators of technology."

In an industry facing pilot shortages and seeking to innovate for the future, programs like the Aviation Academy aren't just nice to have—they're essential. By opening doors, building bridges, and literally helping dreams take flight, the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida is ensuring that the next generation of aviation professionals will be as diverse as the skies they'll navigate.

What they see is indeed what they'll be. And thanks to the dedication of the members of the 100 Black Men of Greater Florida and their partners, what these young people are seeing is a future where they belong in the cockpit, the control tower, the engineering lab, and the boardroom. The sky is no longer the limit—it's just the beginning.



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