

PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE

WHERE DREAMS TAKE FLIGHT:

GULF SHORES HIGH SCHOOL AVIATION ACADEMY



By: Dr. Matt Akin – Superintendent

Every transformational school program begins with a dream.

For Gulf Shores City Schools, one of those dreams was to create an Aviation Academy where high school students could do more than learn about airplanes from a textbook. We envisioned a program where students could build an aircraft, learn from experienced aviation professionals, earn industry certifications and even begin flight training before graduating from high school.

It was an ambitious idea. Public high schools do not typically own airplanes, employ commercial pilots or provide students with a pathway toward earning a private pilot certificate. Through the generosity of community partners, the commitment of our instructors and the determination of our students, that dream has become a reality.

Today, Gulf Shores High School students study aerodynamics, aircraft systems, avionics, navigation, flight operations and aviation safety. They can prepare for the FAA Part 107 Remote Pilot Knowledge Test and the private pilot written examination. They have built an FAA-approved airplane,

Dr Mackey, Alabama State Superintendent



Haley Kellogg, GSHS Flight Instructor

participated in aviation internships and gained hands-on experience that would be difficult to duplicate in a traditional classroom.

The program reached another remarkable milestone when Gulf Shores High School became one of only a small number of public high schools in the country to offer flight instruction to students. This opportunity was made possible by Vince and Lynn Boothe, who donated a 2016 TL Sting S4 aircraft for student training.

For me, however, the Aviation Academy is more than an innovative school program. It is deeply personal.

Long before Gulf Shores City Schools dreamed of creating an aviation program, a third-grade boy came home from a school field trip with an aviation dream of his own.



Captain Dylan Akin

That boy was my son, Dylan.

After visiting the U.S. Space & Rocket Center in Huntsville, Dylan announced that he was going to attend the United States Air Force Academy and become an Air Force pilot. It was an unusually specific goal for a child his age, but for Dylan, it was not simply a passing childhood phase.

From that point forward, aviation became part of our family's life. Dylan, his younger brother Brett and I traveled to air shows in Chattanooga, Birmingham and anywhere else we could reasonably reach. If airplanes were involved, Dylan wanted to be there. While other children's plans for the future changed from year to year, his remained remarkably consistent.

By middle school, Dylan was already researching what it would take to earn an appointment to the Air Force Academy. He understood that admission would require more than good grades. He needed to challenge himself academically, demonstrate leadership, participate in extracurricular activities and earn a congressional nomination.

again and again. After the third consecutive call, I finally stepped out and answered.

Dylan could hardly contain his excitement. Congressman Mike Rogers had personally called to tell him that he had received a nomination to the United States Air Force Academy.

On August 30, 2025, Dylan's life tragically ended at the age of 29.

In the days and weeks that followed, our family began hearing stories we had never heard before. Friends told us how Dylan encouraged them to finish their college degrees. Enlisted members of his squadron shared how he supported them as they considered applying for



He participated in athletics, even though sports were not always his favorite activity. He joined the Civil Air Patrol in high school. At 16, he began taking flight lessons and eventually earned his private pilot certificate before graduating from high school.

One of my favorite memories occurred while I was sitting in one of my doctoral classes. My phone rang, and I saw that Dylan was calling. I did not answer because I was in class. Then he called

The dream he had announced as a third grader was becoming a reality.

Dylan earned his way through the Academy and received one of the highly competitive opportunities to attend Pilot Training at Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas. After completing the demanding yearlong program, he learned that he would fly the C-146A Wolfhound and serve with Air Force Special Operations Command at Hurlburt Field in Northwest Florida.

His assignments and missions took him throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, North America and South America. The little boy who once stood in awe of airplanes at air shows was now piloting one around the world in service to his country.

But flying was only part of Dylan's story.

To his nieces and nephews, he was "Uncle Dyl." To his family, friends and fellow Airmen, he was one of the kindest and most generous people they knew. Dylan cared deeply about others, and he wanted the people around him to recognize the possibilities in their own lives.

flight training or pursuing other opportunities. Others spoke about how he encouraged them to take that first flight lesson or begin working toward a pilot certificate.

Dylan did not just pursue his own dream. He helped other people believe in theirs.

That same spirit can be seen in the Gulf Shores High School Aviation Academy. The program provides students with opportunities that can change the direction of their lives, but those opportunities do not happen simply because the school system owns an airplane or offers aviation courses.

They happen because dedicated people are willing to invest their knowledge, time and hearts in our students.

The boots on the ground making this dream a reality are Haley Kellogg, Rod Kellogg, Brock Harris, Cody Rhoades, and Chance English.



- Haley Kellogg, an Aviation Academy instructor and commercial pilot, provides the daily instruction and guidance that bring the program to life. She teaches students the technical knowledge required in aviation while also helping them understand the discipline, responsibility and attention to detail that flying demands. Working alongside Haley is her husband, Rod Kellogg, a commercial pilot who volunteers his time and expertise to support the academy and mentor its students. Rod's willingness to share his aviation experience gives our students access to knowledge that most young people could receive only through private flight training. This program simply would not happen without the extraordinary commitment of Haley and Rod. Their investment goes far beyond the hours they spend at school or at the airport. They believe in our students and in the possibilities this program can create for them.

- Brock Harris, one of our flight instructors and a former Gulf Shores student, brings another meaningful dimension to the program. His return to help train the next generation of Gulf Shores aviators shows students that the pathway before them is real. Brock once sat where they sit, and he now uses his training and experience to help students begin their own aviation journeys.





- Cody Rhoades is also a former Gulf Shores student who has returned to invest in the next generation. He assists with flight instruction and introduces elementary and middle school students to aviation through flight simulators. By helping younger students experience the excitement of flight, Cody is planting the same kind of dream that inspired Dylan as a third grader.
- Chance English, an Aviation Academy instructor and retired United States Air Force officer, brings valuable military aviation and leadership experience to the classroom. During his Air Force career, he held leadership responsibilities supporting the maintenance and mission readiness of advanced military aircraft, including the F-22 Raptor. He helps students understand that success in aviation depends not only on technical ability, but also on teamwork, precision, accountability and a commitment to excellence.

Together, Haley, Rod, Brock, Cody, and Chance have created something truly special. With the support of the Gulf Shores City Board of Education, community partners, Gulf Shores International Airport, former Career Academies and Technical Education Coordinator Jessica Sampley, and generous donors such as Vince and Lynn Boothe, they are helping young people see that a career in aviation is not simply something they have to admire from a distance; it is something they can pursue.

Lift Off: The Dylan Akin Memorial Flight Training Fund

For a student who dreams of becoming a pilot, a first flight can change everything. However, flight training is expensive. Even with the extraordinary opportunities provided through Gulf Shores High School, the costs associated with instruction, flight hours, examinations and earning a private pilot certificate can create a significant barrier for students and their families.

In Dylan's memory, our family is establishing Lift Off: The Dylan Akin Memorial Flight Training Fund, a designated fund administered through the Dolphin Foundation for Education and Arts. The fund will assist Gulf Shores High School Aviation Academy students with the expenses associated with flight training and earning their private pilot certificates.

Our hope is simple. We want more students to have the opportunity to experience what Dylan experienced, to sit in the pilot's seat, take control of an airplane and realize that a dream that once seemed distant is within their reach.

Dylan's story began with a third-grade field trip. It continued through years of preparation, the United States Air Force Academy, pilot training and service around the world. Although his life ended far too soon, his influence continues through the people he encouraged, supported and inspired.

Through this fund, that influence will extend to a new generation of young aviators.

Every time a Gulf Shores student takes a first flight, completes another hour of training or earns a private pilot certificate with assistance from this fund, a part of Dylan's spirit will be there, helping someone else soar.

If you would like to donate to the Flight Training Fund, please send a check payable to:

The Dolphin Foundation for Education and Arts

Re: Flight Training Fund
P.O. Box 3908
Gulf Shores, AL 36547

or visit <https://thegsdf.org> and Click Donate Now.

