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## Off to a flying start



*Joe McIntyre/staff photographer*

**Cortland Airport flight instructor Corey Polakowski, left, has 16-year-old Nick Yarnell, right, of Homer, double-check his instruments during a preflight check Wednesday in a Piper Cherokee.**

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CORTLANDVILLE — For some people, learning how to drive is an uncomfortable nerve-racking experience. For Homer resident Nick Yarnell, the opposite is true — and he's learning to fly an airplane. Yarnell, 16, and a sophomore at Homer High School, is a student at the 7:47 Aviation Flight School at Cortland County Airport on Route 222 and while most kids his age are practicing for their road tests, Yarnell has been more focused on learning how to navigate the skies.

"Planes have always really interested me," he said. "And I like climbing stuff, and planes can get me higher than any tree really can. I like the view from up in the plane — you get to see basically everything."

Instructor Corey Pawlikowski moved to Cortland last year to teach people how to fly and Yarnell is one of his first students.

Typically, anyone age 16 or older can fly solo after extensive aircraft education on the ground and logging at least 20 hours of flight time with an instructor, which is what Yarnell started working toward when he began taking classes last fall.

Yarnell said when he showed up for his introductory flight and met Pawlikowski, he was excited and immediately fell in love with flying.

"I got my hands on the controls, my feet on the pedals and he (Pawlikowski) tells me, 'go full throttle and halfway down the run way and take off, go up to about 3,000 feet,'" he said. "Then he's like, 'you've got full control of the plane,' and I'm like, 'this is awesome.'"

Pawlikowski said students are trained to meticulously perform pre-flight inspections, fully understand how a plane operates and that flying is a lot safer than one might think.

"(With) aviation accidents, there's a reason they make headlines — it's because it doesn't happen much," he said. "If you think about it, when you're flying around, you have a lot of airspace separating you from other airplanes. You're going down the road, what's separating you from traffic going the other way? About (an inch) of paint."

Young people who are enthusiastic about flying are necessary to its future, Pawlikowski said.

In 1970, he said, the percentage of the U.S. population certified to fly was 0.36 percent. By 2009, that percentage dropped to 0.20 percent. In 1981 the average age of pilots was 37.8 years old and in 2010 it rose to 44.2 years old, he added.

Mid-afternoon Wednesday, Yarnell was in the hangar ticking boxes off a check list as he inspected every

inch of the Piper Cherokee he and Pawlikowski will use to log his fifth hour of flight time. Yarnell uses the type of focus and attention to detail someone with over 100 hours is expected to possess.

And Jim Spaller, owner of 7:47 Aviation, said that is exactly what he and Pawlikowski, his second cousin, try to instill in their students because flying is a mental exercise, and while anyone who wants to learn how to fly has to be committed, being safe is a top priority.

“If you go in with a cowboy attitude, you make rash judgments and poor decisions, you can get into an accident easier in an airplane than you can in a car,” he said. “But ... we teach that out of people to a point — to learn, to understand what you’re doing.”

Kristin Yarnell, Nick’s mother, said she knew the day would come when her son would want to become a pilot so she wasn’t surprised when he asked to take an aviation class and added she has been in a plane and a car with her son and without a doubt he is most comfortable in the air.

“I feel a whole lot safer with him here than I do with him in the car,” she said. “I wish driver’s training was as safe as (flight) training.”