

2023 Girls in Aviation Day Empowers Young Women to Pursue Aviation and Aerospace Careers

by Pamela Powell

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CAHOKIA HEIGHTS - Approximately 150 young women from 17 bi-state area high schools and organizations recently gathered at St. Louis Downtown Airport for the 2023 Girls in Aviation Day event, where they had the unique opportunity to learn more about the aviation industry and related career fields. The event, which was held Sept. 18, is hosted annually by Saint Louis University's Oliver L. Parks Department of Aviation Science at the school's hangar at St. Louis Downtown Airport, in partnership with Women in Aviation International.

“This was our largest Girls in Aviation Day event yet,” said Amy Preis, Outreach Coordinator for SLU's School of Science and Engineering. “Our goal is to connect students with the opportunities in the aviation industry that are out there and possibly haven’t been considered before. The entirety of the aviation industry is hungry for more women in its ranks. We are helping to bridge that gap by exposing women in our community to aviation, encouraging them to consider the types of careers that are available and empowering them to pursue whatever they are interested in.”

During the event, attendees had the opportunity to climb into and check out the cockpit inside a variety of aircraft used by St. Louis University’s certified flight instructors for pilot training and learn more about each plane. “The planes are so cool, and I liked learning about them,” said Allie Meyers, a freshman at Lafayette High School.



The event also featured a career expo, where students had the opportunity to connect with representatives from more than a dozen organizations in the aviation industry about different job opportunities and the paths leading to them. The FAA/NATCA (Air Traffic Control), Greater St. Louis Business Aviation Association, Gulfstream, Ideal Aviation, SLU admissions, St. Louis Lambert International Airport, Take Flight Girls, Inc.,

Transportation Security Administration, the United States Air Force and West Star Aviation were among those investing their time to spotlight the world of opportunities in the aviation industry. St. Louis Downtown Airport provided a static display of a firetruck from its Fire and Rescue department that participants were able to climb into and explore, and AeroCareers, NFP; Gateway Jets, GoJet Airlines and SLU Oliver L. Parks Department of Aviation Science provided the static displays of the planes that students were able to see up close. The event was sponsored by GoJet Airlines, Ideal Aviation, Gulfstream and the Greater St. Louis Business Aviation Association. GoJet served as the headlining sponsor and flew a CRJ-550 into St. Louis Downtown Airport during the event. Attendees were able to see the plane land and tour the inside.

”It’s really an honor to be part of Girls in Aviation Day, helping to grow the next generation of aviators,” said Rick Leach, CEO of GoJet Airlines, as he addressed the participants during the event after the plane landed. “The future of our industry is bright, and when I look around this room, I see a lot of leaders that can be leaders in the aviation industry as well. We are so glad you are taking the first step to look at the aviation industry because the career opportunities are there. It takes a lot of hard work, but the pathway to a career in aviation is achievable.”

Students attending the event were excited to learn about the possibility of pursuing a career in aviation. Lexi Timmerman, a freshman at Mehlville High School, said, “It’s a good opportunity to come here and see if I’m interested in a career in aviation because I hadn’t really learned anything about it yet before today. Aerospace is a big field, but there are a lot of different career options. I think it’s a cool thing to learn about.”

To help provide the young women attending the event with more insight on their pathways to pursuing a career in aviation, three panelists from SLU’s Women in Aviation student chapter participated in a panel discussion, providing the young women attending the event a chance to ask them questions about their journeys and experiences. Hafsa Mou, a junior, Mary Cortesi, a senior, and Jocelyn Ciotti, a freshman, are all pursuing a degree in aviation science from SLU and plan on starting their careers as pilots. Cortesi and Ciotti both said they stumbled across aviation – it wasn’t something they were exposed to growing up – while Mou decided at an early age she would like to be a pilot.

“I couldn’t have been more than four or five when I saw this plane and said, ‘one day, I’m the one who’s going to fly that,’” Mou said. “And everyone around me laughed. Since then, I’ve done everything I could do to make sure I could be here today and become a pilot.

While only 5% of airline pilots are women, the panelists are hoping that will change. “In the aviation program at SLU, 14% of seniors are girls, but it’s growing each year,” said Cortesi. “About 25% of the freshman class are women.”

Rounding out the event, students heard from Stephanie McCloud, founder of Take Flight Girls, Inc., a nonprofit that empowers girls ages 12 to 21 by introducing them to the industries of aviation, travel, entrepreneurship and philanthropy. McCloud is a member of the United States Air Force Reserve, where she serves as an aviation resource manager and the UN Community Service coordinator. In addition, she works as a flight attendant for Delta Airlines. She was able to provide insight on her unique experience in the aviation industry.

“We were part of the induction of the Girls in Aviation event at St. Louis Downtown Airport back in 2019, so it’s very rewarding to see it come full circle today,” said McCloud. “I started Take Flight Girls in 2014 because of the lack of women in aviation, especially minorities that include women of color. We’ve issued over 10,000 scholarships and connected countless girls to resources and mentors and inspired them to pursue their dreams in aviation and aerospace.

McCloud also spoke about the different aviation careers the students could pursue – beyond pilot or flight attendant. Some of the careers she mentioned include air traffic controller, airline veterinarian, aviation attorney, aircraft painter, flight nurse, U.S. Air Marshall, airline mechanics and machinists, and various airport management careers.

St. Louis Downtown Airport Director Sandra Shore was pleased to see such a great turn out for the event and the variety of different careers highlighted. “It was great having so many young women from several different schools here this year,” she said. “The students asked so many great questions and are genuinely interested in learning more about aviation and aerospace. And I am proud that St. Louis Downtown Airport serves as a great example of what women can be empowered to do in this industry. The airport, the fixed space operator that operates out of the terminal and the air traffic control tower all have female managers. It’s truly a woman-run airport.”

Schools in southwestern Illinois and eastern Missouri that had students attending Girls in Aviation Day included Cahokia High School, Collinsville High School, Gibault Catholic High School, Hazelwood Central High School, Lafayette High School, Madison High School, Mehlville High School, Metro Academy High School, Notre Dame High School, Parkway North High School, Roosevelt High School, Sumner High School, University City High School, Vashon High School and Waterloo High School. Individuals from Black Girls in STEM also attended this year’s event.

To learn more about Girls in Aviation Day or opportunities to participate in future events, contact Amy Preis at Saint Louis University's Oliver L. Parks Department of Aviation Science via email at sseoutreach@slu.edu.

St. Louis Downtown Airport is owned and operated by Bi-State Development. It is located a few minutes east of downtown St. Louis in Illinois on 1,000 acres in Cahokia Heights and Sauget.

About Bi-State Development

Bi-State Development (BSD) owns and operates St. Louis Downtown Airport and the Gateway Arch Riverboats, and operates the Gateway Arch Revenue Collections Center and Gateway Arch trams. BSD is the operator of the region's main public transportation system, which includes 24 battery electric buses and more than 260 clean-burning diesel buses that serve 58 MetroBus routes in eastern Missouri and southwestern Illinois. Metro also operates MetroLink light rail vehicles on 46 miles of track serving 38 stations in the two-state area, and operates Metro Call-A-Ride, a paratransit fleet of 123 vans. BSD also operates the St. Louis Regional Freightway, the region's freight district. To learn more about St. Louis Downtown Airport, visit www.stlouisdowntownairport.com.