

A Different Kind of Flying School

Innovative flight *makes it possible* for local kids to access unique education



Front: Scott Stewart and Kevin Beddome.
Back: Felix and T.J. Renaud.

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Pembroke & Area
AIRPORT
Celebrating 50 Years!

Every Sunday afternoon, Felix and T.J. Renaud head to the Pembroke & Area Airport where they board a Bearskin Airlines charter for Brantford. They are part of an education flight that is headed to W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind. The brothers spend the week at the school, learning the Ontario curriculum, and learning life skills that teach them how to live blind. Then they are flown back to Pembroke on Friday afternoon where their mom, Lisa, picks them up and takes them home to Eganville for the weekend.

The cost to attend W. Ross Macdonald School, and the flight to get there, is \$0.

The boys have been going to the school since the 2014-15 school year. This year, Felix is in grade eight and T.J. is in grade nine. They have their own friends that they meet from all over Ontario, and they participate in their own activities. According to their mother, the change this school has brought about in the boys has been incredible.

For starters, the school is built to accommodate people with a vision disability. The school chooses colour schemes, offers assistive technology and when class is over, they teach life skills to be able to live as a blind person in a non-blind world. Their student-teacher ratio is 3:1. For Lisa, the biggest change has been in her sons' self-confidence, something she worried about while they were struggling in the regular school system that just wasn't equipped to accommodate someone with a vision impairment.

"When you're blind, things can take longer to do in a school that is not set up for a blind person," Lisa explains. "When it takes you longer, others label you as being lazy. You're not lazy, you're blind."

The uniqueness of the boys' condition caused them to be bullied,

and they got behind on their education because it took them longer to learn. Lisa is certain that without the opportunity to attend "Ross" as they casually call the school, the boys' education experience would have been dramatically different. She thinks T.J. would likely have dropped out of school, and Felix would have been subject to increased bullying. But at Ross, they're both reaching levels of potential they didn't even know they had.

While Lisa misses their school plays and performances due to the distance to the school, she talks with the boys daily. It's a young age to be living away from family, but it is made a little easier knowing that it was T.J. and Felix's choice to attend Ross. The school offers a one-week trial for a potential student, which the boys both signed up for prior to their first year. They've been going ever since and they can continue going up until age 21 if they wish.

When you ask Felix what he likes best about Ross, his answer is rational. "If it's free to go there and you have food, internet, friendly teachers and its better. It's pretty well free so there's no point in not going," he says. "Before Ross I was shy and an introvert and now I can talk to people easily."

For T.J. the environment was what has made the biggest impact on him.

"The school is much more inclusive," he says. "It's very hands on, especially outside the textbook. There are a lot of supports too - two on-site social workers, 24 hour medical service and there's lots of sports. I'm a lot happier and I can advocate for myself a lot better now. I used to be quiet."

Both boys have good grades and T.J. has dropped 50 pounds by working out at the gym. It's clear that the experience of attending a

school that specializes in teaching youth how to "live blind" is having a positive impact. For Lisa, it's one step closer to a goal she hopes they'll also reach.

"I hope that they can have a future beyond ODSP," she says. ODSP is the Ontario Disability Support Program which is an Ontario government funded program that provides income support to qualifying recipients. Mom just might see that goal reached. T.J. is thinking about nursing and Felix is thinking about game design.

Also part of the education team is Bearskin pilot Kevin Beddome and Scott Stewart who is part of the flight's student shuttle program. Beddome has been flying the route for just over a year, and Stewart has three years under his belt, accompanying students off the aircraft and to their parent or transportation service at the airport, and welcoming them when they board.

"They're cool," says T.J. "We've had them for a while now."

Note: students from across Renfrew County attend W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind. For more information on the school, call 1-866-618-9092 or visit: www.pdsbnet.ca. The Pembroke flight departs around 5:00pm on Sundays and arrives back at 2:30pm on Fridays.

50
Years
IN AVIATION
1968-2018



In addition to the Bearskin Education charter, the Pembroke & Area Airport *makes it possible* for our community to benefit from other aviation services. Some of these include: air ambulance, forest firefighting, wildlife management, search and rescue, drug enforcement, utilities inspection and more.

To ensure our residents and communities continue to benefit from these services, the Airport has launched Project Runway: a fundraising initiative to repave the runway that is used by these and other services.

How To Donate

You can buy a foot of runway for \$250 (tax receipted for the full amount), or you can make a donation of another larger or smaller amount. For details, contact us at: marketing@flycyta.ca

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