

# Sitting on top of the world

And eating a \$100 hamburger

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ROCHESTER — Kelby Ferwerda is on top of the world in more than one sense.

The 25 year old spends his days doing what he loves to do — flying planes. As a flight instructor, he gets to instill that love in his students. And recently the aviation school he owns at Skyhaven Airport in Rochester was recognized with a Flight Training Excellence Award by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA). Started just over three years ago, it's a relatively new school to be having national impact.

When Ferwerda opened the school, there was only one plane. He was the sole instructor and the school was constrained to just the corner of the hangar, with no heat, electricity or running water. Ferwerda said there were more broken airplanes on the ramp than working ones.

Since then, the school has done nothing but expand. Within six to eight months, the school moved to the terminal building of the airport, and "from there we pretty much spread our presence along the terminal building," said Ferwerda, who added that Rochester Aviation also helps maintain the terminal building. Rochester Aviation now boasts four planes, four full-time instructors and two part-timers. They have helped scores of area residents attain their pilot's licenses, averaging 40 to 50 students at any given time, according to Ferwerda.

This was the first year that the AOPA handed out Flight Training Excellence Awards, recognizing "schools and flight instructors that are providing the very highest standard of training and customer service," according to a press release. Rochester Aviation helped Skyhaven Airport experience a yearly 30-50 percent growth, which played a big part in the school receiving the award.

"We created the Flight Train-



**KELBY FERWERDA** displays the Flight Training Excellence Award bestowed on Rochester Aviation by the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association.

Conor Makem/  
Times photo

ing Excellence Awards as part of a long-term, industry-wide effort dedicated to increasing the percentage of students who earn a pilot certificate," said AOPA CEO Craig Fuller. "We feel it's important to have positive role models, so we are encouraging the industry to look at these examples of success and draw inspiration and encouragement from them."

"It's not something we were expecting," Ferwerda said after receiving the award in Palm Springs, Calif. "It's great to see this type of feedback from the general aviation community. It's pretty outstanding for us... to get someone of their status to recognize us."

With more than 3,500 flight schools across the country and 2,500 nominations, Rochester Aviation was one of only seven schools to receive the honor. The [excellence in flight] award is given based on customer input and the weighing of 47 characteristics that are important in flight schools.

For Ferwerda, developing a community-based environment is a characteristic that he's put a strong focus on over the years. When students join Rochester Aviation, they tend to want to be

around more.

One difference at Rochester Aviation, he said, is recognizing milestones in the students' progress, and ensuring they recognize their own accomplishments.

"Anything I see they did a great job on, that's an accomplishment," he said. "Even if it's good landing or right attitude in flight."

Another piece of community building comes with events such as the "Air Race," which took place in August. Participants got one month to go to five destinations. They were required to buy a T-shirt. The first one to photograph himself or herself at each airport with the T-shirt won. At the end of the month there was a big barbecue where the winner got a flight bag full of stuff. Many more got prizes, and the profits from the shirts, were given out as a scholarship to the person who wrote the best essay on what general aviation and learning to fly means.

Although Ferwerda admits the "race" did increase aircraft utilization, the real secret is that it gave participants five great destinations to take family and friends to that were all within 100 miles. Each had a restaurant or another attraction. The barbe-

cue was an opportunity for students to meet each other, and the school got some goodwill with a scholarship.

Another Air Race is being planned for this spring, and the event is expected to continue twice a year, traveling to farther and more scenic locations.

Ferwerda notes that traveling somewhere for a meal is one of the most common flights for private pilots. In flying circles, it's known as "the \$100 hamburger," and the meal is often just the excuse to get in the air.

Flying "is an opportunity to get up there and see the world from a different perspective," Ferwerda said. "I fly all over the United States to visit family and friends, and travel."

Ferwerda said he spends 80 to 90 hours per week at Rochester Aviation.

"My smiling face at the front desk is very important," he said.

With more than 400,000 members, AOPA is the largest aviation association in the world. From its headquarters in Frederick, Md., it provides services and government advocacy for the general aviation community.

Foster's reporter Liz Markhleskaya contributed to this article.