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Savannah Morning News.

Dollars & Sense: Birthday present puts son in flight

By Arlinda Smith Broady

Posted Nov 10, 2010 at 12:18 AM

It seems the smaller our children are, the easier it is to please them. I remember my son Caslin's favorite toy as an infant was a tube sock filled with cellophane and tied in a knot. He'd squeeze it and delight at the crunchy sound it made.

This past Sunday that same child celebrated his 12th birthday, and his father and I really wanted to do something special for him.

He started a new school this year and has been thrown into a lot of uncomfortable situations. He's triumphed over some of the obstacles and faltered behind others.

So it would be nice to give him something to smile about. But he's already become a surly teen who's more likely to snarl at us than thank us for thinking of him.

As parents, we can't let that deter us, though.

Earlier this year, my husband won a free discovery flight from Coastal Empire Flight Training at a business networking event.

Also known as an introductory flight lesson, it's a fun way to get your "sky legs" so to speak.

The actual flight time is about 30 minutes, but the first half of the lesson starts on the ground. The student learns the different parts of an airplane and what makes it work as well as doing the pre-flight check.

Your instructor will show you how to adjust your seat belt and get your headset on before you taxi the aircraft from the ramp to the taxiway and the runway.

The whole time you are the pilot. The instructor will be talking on the radios and will tell you what to do. And of course, he'll take over if there are any missteps.

The owners, Denis and Samantha Boissonneault, told us there are no age restrictions. As a matter of fact their youngest son, Austin, had his first flight at 5 months and their older son Darren, 10, has already logged 7 hours of flight time.

"He said he'll solo at 16, get his license at 17 and become a flight instructor at 18," said Samantha. "He wants to pay his way through college."

Caslin has been fascinated by airplanes since he was a toddler. When we lived in Greenville, S.C., he and his father often sat outside Donaldson Center Industrial Air Park in the bed of the pickup truck watching planes take off and land.

They'd identify different models as they munched on homemade sandwiches. He has a collection of model planes and helicopters and holds the family high score in all the Wii flying games.

So it was a natural evolution to allow him to get behind the wheel of a real plane.

He started out on a simulator flying a Boeing 747.

“You have the lives of 550 passengers in your hands,” Denis told him.

I watched my son operate the throttle and the foot pedals while focusing on the scene before him. I was probably just as excited as he was, but about a minute in the air, he crashed into the sea.

“Why don’t you try a plane closer to the one you’ll be flying,” Denis said. “That 747 is a whole lot of plane for your first time.”

Soon enough it was time for the real deal.

My family trooped out onto the tarmac, and the instructor said it would be OK if my younger son came along for the ride.

“Zoinks!” I thought. “I can’t put both my boys in harm’s way.”

But statistically they were safer in the air then riding down Interstate 95 in my minivan.

As they went through the pre-flight check, Caslin surprised me with how much he knew about the aircraft. Once the guys were inside, Dad and I headed back to the hangar.

The half hour went by quickly as the boys headed downtown and buzzed the Talmadge Bridge, combining Caslin's two favorite things - great engineering structures and aviation.

The Boissonneaults have had the flight school for about 18 months although Denis has been a flight instructor for five years.

"This is all we do," said Samantha. "We have a passion for flying and for teaching."

They had a camp this past summer and plan to do another one next year.

"A lot of the commercial pilots are retiring, and right now less than one quarter of one percent of the American population has pilot's licenses," she said.

“Even if you don’t want to do this for a living, we encourage people to give it a try.”

I ran into one man who’d always loved airplanes and just recently decided to take that passion to the next level.

Oscar Collum is in the Air National Guard and although he’s around planes a lot, he never got the chance to actually pilot one.

Now he’s close to the 20 hours of flight time required for his license.

“For about $4,000 tops you can fly,” he said. “And if you wanted to buy your own aircraft, you can get one for $20,000 to $25,000.”

When you consider that’s less than most luxury cars, it’s not a bad hobby.

“Some people play golf and some like to fly for recreation,” said Samantha. “It’s all about doing what you love.”

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