NEWS RELEASE

Inspiring careers in aviation

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Nia Allen has always thought that planes are cool.

Top: Representatives from American Airlines, Illinois Aviation Academy and Tuskegee NEXT joined cadets for a special reception at DuPage Airport; Tuskegee NEXT cadet Nia Allen and Chicago-based First Officer Mika Tang

But she didn't always know much about them or aerospace in general. She even remembers being scared walking aboard flights when she was younger. "At that time, I didn't think women could even be pilots," she said. But when she was 8 years old, she met a female first officer and the wheels starting turning. "I remember thinking, 'We can do that?' But then I was like, if she's a co-pilot, then I want to be the pilot."

Now every time a plane passes above her, Nia instinctually looks to the sky. She wants to see the direction it is going, estimate its speed, even identify what type of aircraft it is from tell-tale markings. She knows more about aviation than your average high school graduate.

She started flying planes herself when she was 14 years old, and through hard work taking college classes in high school, she'll begin her college career at Middle Tennessee State University this fall as a sophomore in the school's aerospace program while continuing to fly and work toward becoming a commercial airline pilot.

As Nia will tell you, aviation is not easy, but it is a passion for aspiring pilots. And outreach programs like Chicagoland-based Tuskegee NEXT are working to show at-risk youth that becoming a pilot is more accessible than they might think.

Indeed, flight schools across the country play a key role in this effort in their respective communities. American Airlines launched its Flight School Grant Program in March with the goal of generating a renewed interest in aviation, an important effort for the future of the airline industry.

Initially the grant program was intended for flight school applicants only. But when Bob Werderich, owner of the Illinois Aviation Academy, found out about the grant, he didn't hesitate to fill out an application for Tuskegee NEXT, the nonprofit outreach program.

"I got into aviation because I grew up in aviation," Bob said. "[We] all feel that aviation is the coolest thing in the whole world. What gets me excited is I see the kids that come into my airport and literally hang on my fence just to watch the planes take off and land and taxi in. What [we're] trying to do is find gateways for people to become pilots — whether it be recreationally or whether it be professionally — what we want them to do is embrace aviation and grow up with it. And that's why I filled out the application and [American] responded."

Currently the Tuskegee NEXT program is for cadets ages 16 to 20, but with the American grant, organizers intend to expand the program to students as young as 8. The idea is that when younger kids have exposure to aviation, there is a greater chance for long-term interest and success in cadet programs, ultimately encouraging them to continue on to pilot school.

Tuskegee NEXT, in conjunction with local community organizations, aims to target kids in existing programs to ensure that aviation education is added to their curriculums.

On July 28, Tuskegee NEXT hosted an open house allowing the community, donors and potential cadets a chance to see the program firsthand. Wil Hehman, manager, Pilot Career Strategy, DFW Flight Academy (GSW), ORD Chief Pilot Bill Sponsler and ORD-based First Officer Mika Tang attended and met with Tuskegee NEXT's executive director, Sanura Young, as well as Nia and some of the other cadets.

"If you can get kids interested when they're young, you have a far greater chance of finding these passionate kids before they get distracted with other things," Bill said.

American invested $25,000 in the Tuskegee Next program and $139,000 in all seven programs awarded grants in 2017. The other Flight School Grant Program recipients were: Riverside Flight Center ($25,000); Infinity Flight Group ($25,000); U.S. Aviation Academy ($25,000); Midwest Air LLC d/b/a Crosswinds Aviation ($25,000); Global Aviation Corporation ($10,000); U.S. Aviation Academy/UNT ($4,000).

