

IslandLife

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Pilot-teacher team give kids flight of their lives

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Richmond dads serve up a field trip that underprivileged students will never forget

Thirteen-year-old Kael Vincent gives a big high-five to his buddy as he disembarks the Harbour Air floatplane. “Going down, dropping and tilting was awesome,” says the Grade 7 student from Vancouver Eastside’s Lord Strathcona elementary school. “I have never flown before and it really was cool.”

Kael, the oldest of five siblings, went on to say: “From the air, the cars look like toys and the view from up above is pretty cool too.”

The flight, out of the Flying Beaver building, was thanks to two Richmondites with big hearts.

Bill Gillies, a pilot with Abacus Mining and Exploration Corporation and Doug Sherrett, a teacher at Strathcona, came up with the idea of taking the graduating class from the East Hastings school on a field trip they would not soon forget.

The bond between the two men began two years earlier, when the two started kibitzing on their bus commute from Richmond to Vancouver.

Through their morning conversations, the two realized both their children attended Grade 6 at Westwind elementary. Soon, the conversation turned to Strathcona – a school smack dab in the poorest postal code in the country.

“I was shocked when Doug told me that school management spent a large part of their time fundraising to provide breakfast and lunch for about 400 kids, many of whom otherwise wouldn’t eat during the day,” says Gillies before embarking on his fourth short flight of the day. “Doug then mentioned to me that during the next few weeks, his students would focus their studies on geology.”

The pilot was moved to do something. Since Gillies worked with geologists, he offered to have a company geologist come and speak to the inner-city kids about the industry. Gillies went a step further and raised enough money (\$7,000) in corporate donations to send more than 60 Grade 6 and 7 students on a field trip to the BC Museum of Mining in Squamish. It was so successful, the educational/fun excursion was



MICHELLE HOPKINS/RICHMOND NEWS

Strathcona Students, from left, Mercy Walker, Patty Evoy and Kael Vincent with pilot Bill Gillies. Right, Patty co-pilots.

repeated the following year.

“The impact on these kids is huge,” says Sherrett. “You’ll find the students quite articulate but because of the real poverty these kids live with, many don’t get an opportunity to get out and experience the real thing ... it’s one thing to see a floatplane on television but to experience it personally is quite another.”

Patty Evoy, 12, won the chance to be Gillies “co-pilot” and she was thrilled.

“I’ve never been on a water plane,” she says, giggling with her friend Mercy Walker, 12. “It’s really exciting. I loved all the dials and stuff, and the view was beautiful.”

Eric Zhou, 13, was a little nervous initially but overcame his fear and “loved his first flight.”

“I liked it when the pilot spun the plane around,” he says shyly. “I wasn’t sure what to expect ... I would like to fly again but I don’t know if I will.”

The thrills, giggles and laughter were echoed by many of the 65 students who were given an opportunity to soar.

The day started bright and early. The kids were whisked away from their school at 8 a.m. by bus heading to Richmond. Their first stop was at Transport Canada’s Search and Rescue Base.

The students were able to go inside the hovercraft and slip into the diver’s gear.

From there, they headed to the Vancouver International Airport’s (YVR) Tower. The air traffic controllers took the time to explain to the students what all the computer graphics meant — showing the planes landing and departing. At 1:30 p.m., the kids met up with Mayor Malcolm Brodie at the Olympic oval.

When asked by the kids why he devotes so much of his spare time to these field trips, Gillies replies: “The catalyst was when I took my own children to Ethiopia and we

saw up close how impoverished the kids were ... we also went to a couple of orphanages and it can’t help but affect you.”

Soon after Gillies returned from his African trip, that serendipitous bus ride with Sherrett happened. “I was appalled that we had this kind of poverty (at Strathcona) in our financial centre of Vancouver,” says Gillies. “I get the satisfaction of giving these kids some perspective about the world and the opportunities that are out there for them if they want them ... that anything is possible for these kids, they just need a bit more of a helping hand.”

“They might be impoverished in a sense that they don’t have as much money but they aren’t impoverished in terms of what they can accomplish if they get a chance to be educated.”

At the end of the day, students came up to Gillies to say that aviation is cool, “really the coolest!”

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