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Retiring Pilot Completes His 700th Flight with Young Eagles

By [David Jen](#) Nov 8, 2023



Master Pilot Bob Leuten, 79, of Pleasanton, finishes a flight check as he prepares to take off from the Livermore Municipal Airport as part of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles Program. The veteran pilot recently flew a young passenger, Cyrus Patel, 13, over the foothills of Mt. Diablo. (Photo - Doug Jorgensen)

LIVERMORE — Earlier this fall, a small red and white airplane climbed out from Livermore Municipal Airport on a short, but significant, flight over the foothills of Mt. Diablo. At the controls of the two-seater was Master Pilot Bob Leuten, 79. Flying shotgun was 13-year-old Cyrus Patel, part of the Experimental Aircraft Association's Young Eagles program.

The flight would mark Leuten's 700th flight with Young Eagles, a program in which he has participated since 1999 in the hope of inspiring the next generation of aviators. The flight would also be Leuten's last for the program. He retired as a Young Eagle pilot.

"I'm still at the top of my game as far as pilot skills are concerned," said Leuten, a Pleasanton resident. "I have no known healthcare issues, but I'd rather quit on my terms, wishing that I had flown a few more Young Eagle flights than regret not having stopped sooner."

Launched in 1992, the Young Eagles program organizes volunteer pilots and aircraft to give free introductory flights to those between the ages of 8 and 17 who have an interest in aviation. The program has done at least 2.3 million flights in more than 90 countries, with 20,000 aviation professionals directly crediting the program for their inspiration.

"It's very gratifying to know that I have introduced so many Young Eagles to love aviation (and) go on and get their private pilot certificate," said Leuten.

Cyrus, for one, attributes his aviation passion to his Young Eagles experiences, and hopes to become either a commercial pilot or an aviation attorney.

"It was an amazing experience flying with Bob," he said. "The time spent with the Young Eagles has ignited my passion for aviation and I hope to become a commercial pilot or aviation attorney someday."

Leuten supports that goal.

"There is a pilot shortage," said Leuten. "When you take a flight on an airline, you want to know that the pilot and the crew are motivated, interested, and they're competent. That's all part of the Young Eagle qualification and mantra."

A Government Accountability Office report this year found airlines — particularly smaller, regional ones — struggling to find enough pilots to meet demand, leading to at least two failed attempts by airlines to increase pilot supply by relaxing certification standards.

"Thanks to volunteer pilots like Bob, who freely dedicate their time, knowledge and aircraft, we have provided first-time flights to nearly 8,000 kids out of the Livermore Airport," said Sophia Patel, volunteer coordinator for the EAA Livermore Chapter. "It is really remarkable to see the spark in kids' eyes after their first Young Eagles flight."

Leuten's own aviation training began with an overheard conversation about flying lessons, while stationed with the Army Signal Corps at Fort Sill, Ok. But he traced his passion back to a simple childhood episode while growing up in Cleveland.

"I looked up at the sky and I said, look at that small plane," he said. "And I was hooked."

Although retired from Young Eagle flying, Leuten still intends to work as a ground crew member at Young Eagle functions, and to fly for pleasure.