

## Higher Learning

East Hill Flying Club offers students the chance to see life from a new perspective

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*Written by Olivia Hall Correspondent*

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Flight Instructor Mike Thomas helps his student Josh Marble, 18 from Corning, pull out a plane from the hangar at East Hill Flying Club. Marble did his first solo glider flight at 14 and is now taking power instruction.

**ITHACA** —A warm, slightly overcast day in Ithaca with a 3-knot wind from the west provided ideal conditions for Debbie Kearl Minnock’s first solo flight.

Strapped into a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, Minnock was to become the latest East Hill Flying Club student to pass the first milestone of her pilot’s training. The initial takeoff felt a little shaky; “I was pretty nervous,” the Lansing native and mother of five said. But then she entered “the pattern” —a rectangle above the airport.

“By the time I was setting up to make my first landing,” she said, “I had lost my shakiness, and all my training and ability kicked in.”

Two takeoffs, patterns and landings later, it was official: Minnock had soloed, getting her a little closer to being allowed to fly unaccompanied.

“I felt great,” a relieved Minnock said, “like I was still up in the clouds.”

As per tradition, a T-shirt with her name and the date of her accomplishment now hangs on a wall at the Club.

*More than 230 members*

Founded in 1952 by mechanics at Robinson Airlines (later US Airways), the club not only brings together more than 230 local aviation enthusiasts —60 of them active —but also operates a not-for-profit flying school.

Approximately 20 students a year take lessons from EHFC manager David St. George and six other certified instructors who operate under the FAA’s Part 141 approval. Unlike the more relaxed Part 61 approval, a Part 141 flight school must meet certain requirements and submit each curriculum it wishes to have approved to

the FAA for review. Part 141 approved schools are subject to regular surveillance audits by the FAA.

“That status is pretty hard to achieve and maintain,” St. George said. The EHFC school won the 2012 National Flight Training Excellence Award from the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association.

Hoping to join the small ranks of pilots in the United States, students acquire everything from a basic private pilot’s license to a commercial license, for which St. George is an FAA-certified examiner.

With the help of a set of self-study training materials, a flight simulator and, of course, lessons in the air, students practice such skills as maneuvering, climbing and descending, and familiarize themselves with weather conditions and navigation.

“We teach a lot of data acquisition and analysis,” St. George said. “None of these are difficult, I would emphasize; this is not Mensa stuff. The math required for navigation is at the sixth-grade level, there’s just a lot of it laterally.”

The biggest challenge for many beginners is safely —and elegantly —landing the plane.

“You can equate landing to parallel parking,” said Bill Kreuser, a Cornell graduate student who acquired his license in four months and 40 hours of flying, about half the average time. “You can always do it, but it may not be the perfect parking job every time. Trying to pull off a real nice landing is something I’m working hard at every time I fly.”

### *Decision-making a key skill*

But the abilities that St. George most likes to emphasize are meta-skills, such as risk management and judgment.

“Decision-making can be hard, because you have so much information coming at you,” Kreuser said.

“Dealing with this builds a really resilient person, someone who is self-reliant and who’s got a lot of stick-to-it-ness,” St. George said. “It’s almost a joke that pilots become a sort of alpha person.”

Even the most experienced pilot, however, is taught to rely on standardized procedures to ensure the safest flight possible. Before a recent outing in a Cessna, St. George, who has been flying for 42 years, walked around the plane, working his way down a checklist to inspect every important component, from the beacon light on the tail tip to the moving flaps on the wings.

“There is a method to doing this,” he said. “The most common way for ending up in a corn field is to run out of fuel. How dumb is that? How avoidable.”

So far, the club’s record speaks for itself: In 60 years, there has been one small training accident.

“We maintain that safety record,” St. George said, “by being very aggressive about making sure that members maintain their skills.”

Members are required to fly at least once every 90 days, and can choose from a variety of planes, co-owned by everyone in the club. Among the EHFC’s seven aircraft are two small trainers, a leased sport plane, a tail-wheel Citabria and a Mooney M20J —the “fun, sexy plane” of the lot, St. George said.

The most popular machines are three Cessna 172 Skyhawks, “sort of the sedans of planes,” St. George said. “They go fast enough, are comfortable and not too challenging to operate.” Flying offers freedom

Kreuser loves the freedom these machines give him. Within two weeks of earning his pilot’s license, he spontaneously flew several friends to Martha’s Vineyard for a weekend.

“We’ve got pictures of Bill on the beach with lobsters,” David St. George laughed. “He’s sort of the poster boy for what we want East Hill to be. Which is, get the certificate, fly and have fun.”

Back in Ithaca, Kreuser is able to share his trip experience with fellow aviators at the club’s regular barbecues, picnics and seminars. “The camaraderie between pilots is a lot of fun,” he said. “We get together and talk about flying for hours.”

In the end, celebrating and spreading this love of flying is what the club is all about, St. George said. To that end, the EHFC offers monthly “Learn-to-Fly” seminars for adults, as well as an Aviation Explorers Club for children.

“We want to expose them to aviation as a viable career option,” St. George said.

If they get hooked, perhaps they will dream of being a professional pilot someday, just like 19-year-old Derek Nicol. Flying since he was 16, Nicol is preparing for his commercial license exam. The view from his “office” window will be one of his favorite perks of the job.

“I love being in in the clouds, above them,” Nicol said. “That makes it all worth it —going up to see what not many people see.”

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## **East Hill Flying Club**

**FOUNDED:** 1952

**MISSION:** To advance and improve aviation through education and the enjoyment of personal flying.

**MEMBERS:** 230-plus

**ONLINE:** ehfc.net

**UPCOMING:** Free “Learn-To-Fly” seminar, 9-11 a.m. Sunday, Sept. 15; fall breakfast and fundraiser, 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 22