

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Higher Heights: Nonprofit Seeks To Ensure V.I. Youth Explore Aviation Careers

Business / **Published On July 11, 2018 09:36 AM /**

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ST. CROIX -- Less than four percent of commercial pilots in the United States are Black and less than five percent are Hispanic, according to one JetBlue official, but there's an organized effort to change that statistic through aviation summer camps for minority youth across the nation – even here.

Limited Access

"The biggest hurdle to a career in aviation is limited access," Tom Lloyd told The Consortium Tuesday.

Mr. Lloyd is JetBlue's System Operations Duty Director in Long Island City, NY. He traveled to St. Croix as a representative of the airline company, which has partnered with the [Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals](#) (OBAP) to host the annual [Aviation Career Education \(ACE\) Academy](#).

It's an important mission that they've undertaken, Mr. Lloyd said, to break down barriers in the field.

"We need aviation to be accessible to everybody; that's how we get the very best in our company and our field," he said. "To a place like this, aviation is a lifeline to everything from cargo to medical to basic transportation needs. But, overall, it's the engine of our economy."



Lionice Webster, Danthony Colón, and Trevhon James watch with Tom Lloyd as a Jetblue aircraft comes into the Henry E. Rohlsen International Airport during an ACE Academy field trip.

Bridging the Gap

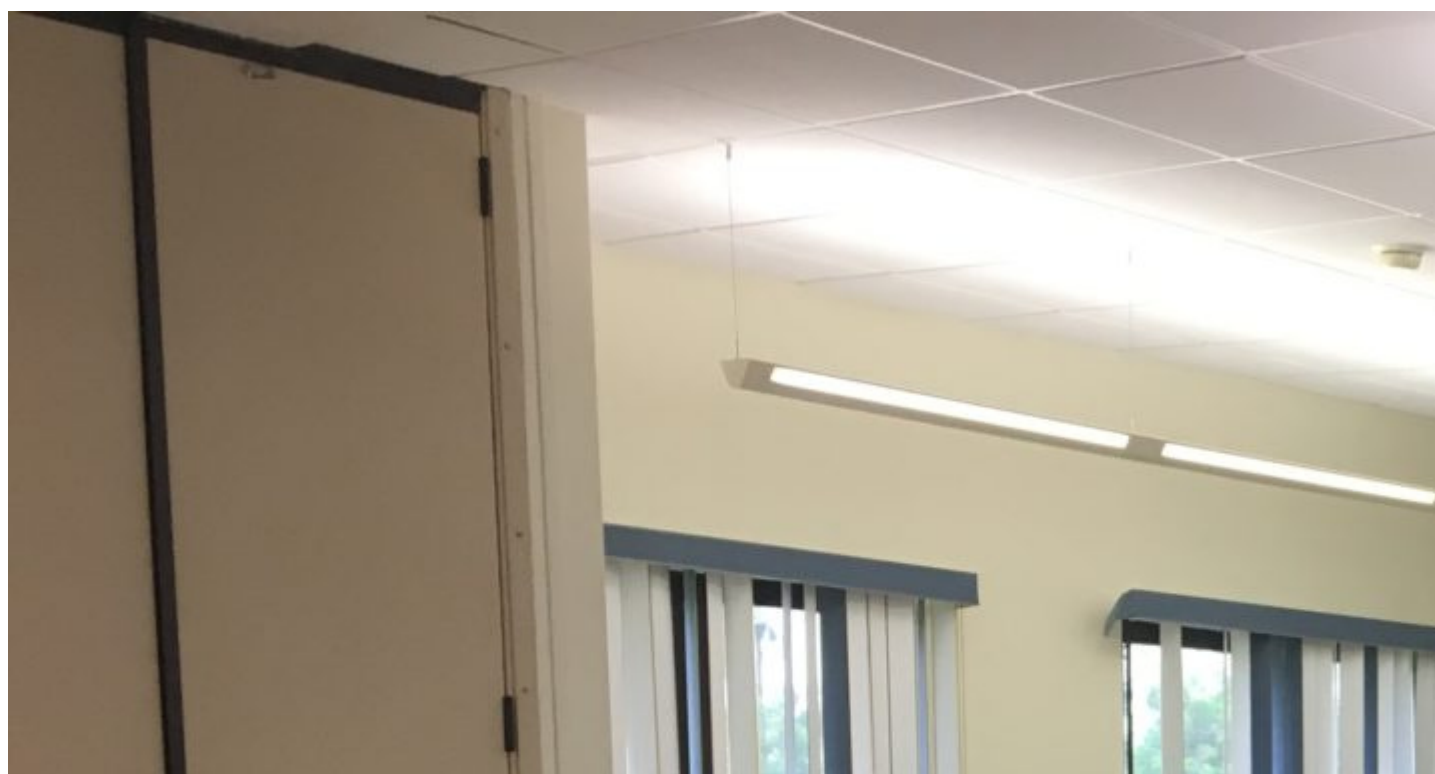
OBAP started the ACE Academy back in 1992 but, more recently, brought the program here to the Virgin Islands in 2012. Since then, up to 25 high school students who express interest through the application process are able to attend the summer camp every year, according to V.I. ACE Academy Director and JetBlue First Officer Granville Theo Smith Jr.

In exchange for a \$50 registration fee, the students learn from working professionals, go on field trips, explore career options, and get meals for a week. Their curriculum covers basics in aviation, aerodynamics, aerospace engineering, crew resource management, weather, flight planning and navigation.

This week, 23 students from high schools and junior high schools across the territory are participating in the program. These include the St. Thomas-St. John Seventh-day Adventist, Luella, Charlotte Amalie, John H. Woodson, Freewill Baptist, Church of God Holiness, St. Croix Educational Complex, Arthur Richards, CJM and Elena Christian schools. The University of the Virgin Islands has opened up its St. Croix campus to the students for their classroom instruction.

This year's ACE instructors boast resumé's that include JetBlue Airways, United Airlines, Lockheed Martin, Delta Airlines, Republic Airways and the U.S. Coast Guard. Among them are pilots, an aerospace engineer, and a flight examiner: Randall Rochon, Jordan Queen, Monique Grayson, Ronaqua Russel, Sheldon Martin, Mike Henneman and Arnold Wallace.

On Tuesday, 14-year-old Emmanuel Roy of St. Joseph Catholic High School could tell The Consortium how many turbine blades were on the engine of JetBlue's E-190 aircraft, and 14-year-old Myles Homer from the St. Thomas SDA School could explain the difference between the A-320 and the A-321. Both boys have been dreaming of a future in aviation for a long time; ACE has been a conduit for their dreams to come true.



"A successful path is sometimes a lonely path" - Mike Hennemann, United Airlines Captain and St. Croix native

"When I look at a plane, I look at the structure, the aerodynamics of the plane, how it functions, what can be fixed and what can be improved in the plane," Mr. Homer said while waiting for a JetBlue flight to land during a field trip at the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport. "I think it's [ACE] a way for me to expand not only my education but my future."

Mr. Homer wants to be an aeronautical engineer when he grows up and Mr. Roy, a pilot.

"I always had a love for aviation. I really love planes. I love to travel a lot, and I wanna be a pilot too," Mr. Roy said. "From like a young age, if I hear something coming, I would go outside to see if it was a plane coming, and I'd go like 'Oh it's United, it's Delta - something' "

The highlight of Mr. Roy's time at ACE will be "flying day" on Thursday when the ACE students get to apply all they've learned and pilot a plane under the guidance of experienced professionals.

Some students are already impressing their instructors with their knowledge of the aircrafts – students like 17-year-old Brandon McLeish from CAHS.

"A few of the guys they actually know more than almost me," said United Airlines Pilot and ACE Instructor Randall Rochon. "The amount the information that Brandon knows about the airplane, I mean, you would think that Brandon actually works for JetBlue right now."

The students' "enthusiasm of wanting to learn about aviation," is exciting, according to Rochon



the beginning of their new career," he said.

Orchydia Sackey, former ACE student, graduated with a pilot

slot from the U.S. Air Force Academy this May.

Success Stories

And for quite a few Virgin Islanders, ACE has been the catalyst for present-day careers in aviation.

Orchydia Sackey, 21, attended the ACE Academy twice while in high school at the St. Croix Educational Complex. The adrenaline she felt while flying over Tortola and Virgin Gorda during her "flying day" experience was one of many confirmations that she was destined to become a pilot.

Fast-forwarding to 2018, Miss Sackey is now a [U.S. Air Force Academy](#) graduate and has landed a very coveted pilot slot. This route has left her free of student debt and with two months of paid leave before returning to the mainland to begin official pilot training. Miss Sackey used the time and money to travel to eight different countries in Europe, the Middle East and Asia this summer.

But before the perks was a challenging journey.

According to [Women in Aviation International](#), only 7 percent of all pilots within the U.S. are women. In her class of 1200, Miss Sackey said she was one of 17 black females.

Being underrepresented during a very competitive and emotionally challenging process was hard, she explained to the V.I. ACE students on Tuesday. She told them that they may have to experience some of what she did, but it wasn't impossible to overcome.

"Honestly, you will be a minority," she said. "It is primarily a white male world in the Air Force, in corporate America, and I feel like we're not exposed to that in the Virgin Islands...but, if you decide that no one's gonna tell you 'no,' then no one can stop you."

Miss Sackey was one of several attendees who were both former ACE students and current aviation professionals. Trevor Valery, 23, also spoke briefly with the students on Tuesday. The St. Croix native is a pilot for Bohlke International Airways who also attended the ACE Academy while in high school.



V.I. ACE Academy Director Granville Theo Smith answers questions for ACE Academy students during a field trip Tuesday.

What does community support look like?

One of the many ways the local community can support this program, according to Mr. Smith, is to spread the word that it exists. By doing so, more young people can get exposure to careers they may have never known were options for them.

According to Mr. Rochon, aviation is alien to many people and that's why OBAP's ACE Academy is important to this community and others that are similar.

"It's important here in the Virgin Islands because aviation, I think, to a lot of people, is just something foreign and it's something that a lot of people don't think that they can do," he said. "They see airplanes in the sky and say, 'Wow, you know I wish I could do that, but I'm afraid of heights, or I don't know how to get involved or I don't know who to talk to or anything like that. So it's important to come down here and tell them, 'Look, we all did it and you can do it too.' "

The local community can also support OBAP monetarily. Those interested in donating can do so [here](#).

Feature Image: Emmanuel Roy (left) poses for a photo with V.I. ACE Director Granville Theo Smith and another student. (Credit: Wyndi Ambrose, VIC)

July 13, 2018

This article was last updated at 12:16 a.m.