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February 2010

Commentary

Flying Carpet

By: Greg Brown

Diné photographers show

"Yá'át'ééh!" wrote Tyler Allen on my Facebook page. "When are you coming to Window Rock so we can go flying?"

It wasn't the first time the young Navajo had posed that question. I'd met Tyler a few months earlier when my buddy Adriel Heisey brought him to Flagstaff. A renowned aerial photographer, Adriel pilots King Airs for the Navajo Nation; after meeting Tyler at Tsehootsooi Middle School's career day presentation, he'd invited the young man on flights around the Southwest.

The remote Navajo Nation capital offers few opportunities for a 14-year-old aspiring pilot. Few people here have seen an airplane up close, much less flown in one. With the nearest youth aviation activities hours away, Adriel and I committed to encouraging the young man's piloting goals. I, too, had promised to take Tyler flying, but had yet to make the 150-mile flight from Flagstaff. Then I got an e-mail from Adriel.

"I invited Tyler to the opening of a Diné Photography exhibit yesterday, at the Navajo Nation Museum. This is no ordinary show—with all the photos taken on the 'Rez' over the years, this is the first-ever juried invitational exhibit entirely by Diné (Navajo) photographers. Tyler took a school photo course last year, so I think he needs to see work at this level. Unfortunately he was moving to a new house and couldn't make it. I'll get him there, sooner or later."

"Sounds like quite an exhibit," I wrote back. "Would Jean and I enjoy it?"

"The show is significant, Greg. There are many images, and the variety is truly amazing, so it's not a lightweight experience. I'd love to meet up with you if you come over. Could we include Tyler in our plans?" We agreed to rendezvous at Window Rock Airport on Halloween day. Adriel would fly his Flight Design CT from nearby Gallup, and take Tyler flying after lunch.

"Let's invite Ethan and Susan along," said Jean upon hearing the plan. Our neighbors appreciate Native cultures; Ethan teaches anthropology at Northern Arizona University.

Despite having flown only once before in light aircraft, our passengers displayed nothing but enthusiasm the morning we took flight—chatting and laughing, they photographed the passing desert flecked with rare autumn snow.

Tyler was waiting to meet us when we landed among saw-toothed hoodoos at Window Rock Airport. Together we watched Adriel scout the runway with a low pass and soar to a landing. Walking to the Navajo Nation Museum, Tyler pointed out Window Rock for which the town is named. If the teen had any qualms about touring a museum with some aging belaganas (white people), he was too gracious to show it.

Upon entering we were greeted by a cheerful Navajo woman costumed as a Halloween princess. Her young son, dressed as a ninja, flew paper-airplane aerobatics inside the gallery. (Jean groaned when I crafted my own paper airplane.) The exhibit was all that

Adriel had promised: striking photographs of the Navajo people, the Four Corners landscape, and the juxtaposition of ancient traditions with contemporary culture. Jean and I purchased a photograph, and Ethan a Navajo star-constellation poster.

Afterward at the restaurant next door, we feasted on Navajo tacos, mutton stew, and corn chile chowder. (Our cross-cultural experience was further seasoned by more costumed revelers.) But when Adriel received a phone call about doing an afternoon photo shoot at Taos, Tyler became increasingly glum. Clearly, he was concerned that his rare flying opportunity might evaporate.

"Is there time to take Tyler flying before we head home?" I whispered to Jean as we walked to the airport. "Of course!" she said. Ethan and Susan were supportive, too. So I approached my young friend.

"What do you say we go flying, Tyler?" Instantly the shadow vanished from his face.

"Yes! I'll call my uncle and tell him to wait before picking me up!" After Adriel preflighted his plane and disappeared aloft, Tyler and I boarded the Flying Carpet. My young friend taxied us out, and after takeoff wheeled us like a pro through crystalline skies. As impressive as Tyler's piloting ability was his orientation. Without reference to chart or compass he flew us to his home under the golden cliffs of Navajo, New Mexico, and over Red Lake to Fort Defiance.

"My grandmother wants to fly, too," he said, pointing to her house. "Can we take her with us, next time?"

"You bet, Tyler!" Without further guidance he navigated us back to Window Rock. Only on downwind did I take the controls for landing. Waiting to photograph Tyler's grin when he left the cockpit were his uncle and little brother.

"Time to go," said Jean, and down the runway we rolled. There was little talk on the way home as we watched the tinted and tortured lands of the Navajo Nation turn gold under a sinking sun.

"Today was a great adventure," said Ethan after we landed. "I'll admit I wasn't sure I wanted to come, but boy am I glad we did!"

"When are you coming back?" Tyler had written on my Facebook page before I got home.

"Soon!" I replied. After all, you needn't be a Navajo to appreciate the joys of flight, especially over the nation's most beautiful landscape.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! [Visit his Web site.](#)