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GIAN JACUZZI takes the controls for the first time.

TOMORROW'S PILOT

PASSING THE TORCH

We all meet youthful aspiring pilots. For many it's a passing interest, but now and then we encounter young people whose aviation knowledge and enthusiasm mark them as exceptional.

Gian Jacuzzi messaged me on Facebook in 2014 about becoming a pilot. He'd gotten the bug at an airshow, and he regaled me with photos of his favorite airplanes. I helped the 13-year-old enroll in AOPA Av8rs and briefed him on EAA's Young Eagles program and Air Academy summer camps. I also introduced the Civil Air Patrol, where he might affordably solo in gliders as young as 14. He in turn asked about my piloting and the *Flying Carpet*. In the process, we discovered that we share the same birthday.

Shortly after Christmas, Gian messaged me asking about collegiate aeronautical programs. After answering, I casually asked about his holiday vacation.

"Truthfully," he said, "there's been a lot of pressure here. My mom, sister Nina, and myself just moved to Florida with nothing but three suitcases of clothes and essentials. So we didn't have much money or time to celebrate the holidays. We spent most of our current money on

airline tickets. We lived in a hotel for two weeks but it was expensive and we were running out of money. We considered going into a shelter, but met some kind people and are staying in their house while my mom finds a job."

I asked how his mother was holding up. "She has lots of hope and is very motivated. Nina and I are very proud of her." There was no hint of sadness or frustration, but clearly this family had suffered a bleak



(LEFT TO RIGHT): Maribel Russo and Nina Jacuzzi, with CFI Yogini Modi and Gian Jacuzzi at Orient Flight School, Homestead Airport, Florida.

Christmas. Yet even among those trials Gian found a bright spot. "The good thing was we flew here in a 747! I got to see the cockpit, and the pilot and first officer were both fascinated by my passion for aviation."

Spontaneously I made an offer: "Ask your mom if she'd be comfortable with Jean and me buying you a flying lesson. You deserve to do something special after all you've been through."

Gian was thrilled, but immediately I hoped I hadn't overstepped bounds. Parents are justifiably suspicious of strangers their children meet online. And plenty more are too scared of flying to let their kids partake. When Gian's mother, Maribel, befriended me on Facebook, I offered credentials.

"Gian has my authorization to take your gift," she replied. "And I don't need to check your background cuz Gian has showed me everything about you since last year! I trust in you and thank you for your support and kindness." What a great family!

My next challenge was identifying a flight experience in faraway Miami appropriate for a teen enthusiast. Ultimately I was referred to Orient Flight School at Homestead Airport, operated by Yogini "Yogi" Modi and her husband, Bryan Shelton. A former India Army major, Yogi set flying records while instructing in the service's microlight aircraft program. General aviation is highly restricted in India, so Yogi was attracted to the United States by the freedom of our skies.

Rather than a basic introductory flight, I requested a full first lesson to fuel Gian's enthusiasm until he's old enough to fund

and train for his private pilot certificate. Yogi recommended her Cessna 150.

“If Gian can get rides to the airport periodically,” she added, “I’ll refer him to young aviator activities and invite him on occasional aircraft repositioning flights.” Within an hour of receiving the gift certificate, Gian wrote me back:

“I couldn’t wait, so I set up my lesson with Yogi for this Thursday! I can’t thank you enough for your help—you’re a compassionate guy.”

I explained that one reward of piloting is sharing our enthusiasm with others. People helped me fly when I was Gian’s age. Aviation has a warm culture of paying it forward and I told Gian I hoped he would do the same someday. Frankly, Gian’s the kind of guy who’d have done that anyway.

That Thursday, texts and photos flooded my way. “I’m on my way to the airport! Can’t wait!!!!” Gian wrote. And then afterward, “I was surprised with myself! It was like I had previous flying experience; I hit all the angles, turns, and speeds just right. And I felt really confident while doing so! I did a couple of 360 turns at 45 degrees. Those are fun! And I did slow flying; the stall warning came on and the nose dropped.”

I also heard from Yogi: “Gian knows lots about airplanes for his age. I gave him the choice of sightseeing or learning the flight controls—like any true pilot he chose the controls. We did preflight check, taxiing, takeoff, climbs and descents, steep turns, scanning for traffic, slow flight, intro to stall, traffic pattern entry, and landing—he kept his cool and was great on the controls for his first flight.”

Now seemed the time for Gian and me to finally hear each other’s voices and see each other’s faces. So with Mari-bel’s approval I congratulated Gian via videochat. Friendship comes in many wonderful flavors. How rewarding it is to share our passion for piloting across the generations! 🐦

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