

Begich Middle School Asks for and Receives a Build-A-Plane Project

Anchorage middle school students interested in aviation are about to get their wish—an airplane that they can build and eventually see fly.

Students will soon be building a Pietenpol Aerial that was donated by Oscar Zuniga a Texas based homebuilder.

Begich Middle School students expressed an interest in building an aircraft after a school presentation by young aviator Barrington Irving.

Irving, who made history by flying his Columbia 400 aircraft around the world solo, gave a speech at the Anchorage middle school in September 2008 in hopes of attracting youth to aerospace.

It worked.

After Irving's presentation Begich Principal Jeanne Fischer talked with FAA's Aviation and Space Education Coordinator, Angie Slingluff about possible project for students.

Zuniga answered the call for a project, after Slingluff contacted

Alaska Airmen Association member Rob Stapleton—also a member of the Experimental Aircraft Association—who brought the request to Tim Rittal, the EAA's local Anchorage Chapter president.

Zuniga was contacted via the Internet Pietenpol list part of an extensive Matronics aviation list-serve that offers contact with other aviators worldwide who have an interest in specific aircraft topics.

"No one in Anchorage had a project, or an aircraft that they wanted to donate—so I put a message on the Pietenpol list, and got this response from Oscar Zuniga who replied: 'Be careful what you ask for because you may find yourself paying to ship a project to Alaska from some far away place,'" said Stapleton. "I responded that knowing Alaskan aviators generosity—that we could probably find a company with pilot owners that might be willing to help the school project idea along."

Zuniga then replied that he had obtained a project from the EAA Chapter 691, from a builder in Santa Fe New Mexico who had been killed in a car accident and that it was available—but needed to be transported to Alaska.

The project was owned and started by Arlene Walsh, a teacher from New Mexico, who built the project as an educational adventure to attract students to aviation. Walsh was a close friend of Susan Larson, president of the Ninety-Nines, who coincidentally is a friend of Slingluff's.

Stapleton then contacted Harry McDonald, a pilot and aircraft owner who is CEO of Carlile Transportation Services, shortly before Christmas.

"Knowing that Carlile had a trucking terminal in Texas and runs regular service from there to Edmonton I immediately thought of Carlile," said Stapleton. "Harry didn't even take a breath before answering that they would ship the aircraft once it was crated and ready to come to Alaska."

Larson offered to oversee getting the craft crated and contacted a friend with the local EAA chapter. Los Alamos EAA chapter member Jeff Scott completed crating the aircraft the weekend of Jan. 17-18—and EAA Chapter 42 has agreed to reimburse him for the expenses.

The Pietenpol Aerial is a modified version of one of the first plans built homebuilt aircraft originally designed in 1928 by Bernie Pietenpol as a two-place parasol that used a Ford Model A engine as its powerplant.

Later Pietenpol modified the fuselage, and had the plans redrawn by a draftsman friend, so that potential pilots and aircraft owners could build the airplane with wood and implements from a regular hardware store and use other powerplants.

The Pietenpol Aerial differs in that it is a biplane that needs



The Pietenpol waits in Santa Fe to challenge student builders.
(Photo provided by Osca Zuniga)



Arlene Walsh flying in a Tiger Moth.
Photo credit Susan Larson

a larger powerplant than its sister Pietenpol Air Camper.

The Walsh Pietenpol Aerial project has the wooden fuselage, empennage, and wings completed, but it was lacking an engine, propeller, cowling, landing gear, wheels, rigging, struts and instruments.

Fellow Chapter 42 member Lars Gleitsmann suggested to University of Alaska Fairbanks, Aviation Maintenance Division assistant professor Kevin Alexander that perhaps they might know of an engine that could be donated.

Alexander responded that as the coordinator of the University's division they would like to donate a rebuilt O-290 for the project—thus helping the build a plane effort along.

Pilot and Begich Middle

School teacher Dan Carey, who will instruct the students on the building of the aircraft met and formed a committee to help organize the project's effort.

Principal Fischer and other school educators met in early January at the Begich Middle School with Slingluff, Alaska Airmen Association's executive director Dee Hanson, Rob Stapleton, and Dominic Balappa, an airline pilot, CFI and A&P who formed the Begich Build A Plane Steering Committee, that will oversee this project.

"We hope the plane will be in Anchorage by the end of January or early February," said Slingluff. "One teacher's dream to have an aircraft that could be used for aviation education still lives on."