



James Downey uses a flight simulator at Eastern Suffolk BOCES in Bellport. He hopes to be the second airline pilot in his family.

How student pilots prepare for disaster

Recent crashes put emphasis on training for emergencies in the cockpit

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

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Throughout his childhood, whether he wanted a quick ride home from a camping trip or a glimpse from above of the sunset, 17-year-old James Downey could count on his uncle, a retired airline pilot, to be there for him in his single-engine Cessna.

Now a student pilot hoping to become the second airline pilot in his family, Downey, of East Islip, awoke last month to a text from his uncle telling him about the crash hours earlier of an Air Canada Express jet at LaGuardia Airport, and the deaths of two pilots.

The news was “so very hard to hear,” the East Islip senior said, but he still climbed into a cockpit a few days later and flew an instructor to Hartford, Connecticut, his farthest flight

to date on what has already been a two-year journey.

“They worked so hard to get to that point, and for them to be stopped at such a young age is horrible,” Downey, who studies aviation through Eastern Suffolk Board of Cooperative Educational Services, or BOCES, said. “But you follow your dream. In any industry there’s a risk. . . . I’m still 100% dedicated and pushing forward to get to that point that they were at too.”

A commitment to flying

He’s like thousands of teenagers, young adults and others across Long Island and the rest of New York who have committed themselves to the seemingly endless hours it will take to pilot a commercial jet — just like the Air Canada pilots, both graduates of Canadian aviation institutions. Getting their initial license, the private pilot certificate, can set a student back

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Thousands of New Yorkers** have committed to the seemingly endless hours — and likely six-figure cost — it will take to learn to pilot a commercial jet.
- **Student pilots balance school** and busy work schedules with studying Federal Aviation Administration regulations, meteorology and remedies for emergencies even as they log the required flight hours.
- **Getting a private pilot’s license** requires passing a written exam, logging a minimum of 40 hours flying — including 10 solo hours.

more than \$10,000, according to Shiv Anand, who owns Aspire Aviation, a Republic Airport-based flight school. By the time they are certified to fly passengers for an airline, that price tag could range from about \$75,000 to six figures.

Student pilots balance high school, college or busy work schedules with studying Federal Aviation Administration regulations, meteorology, what to do when a plane catches fire or if another emergency arises, and logging the required hours of

flight time in what amounts to a flying classroom — with an instructor and solo — before they are ready for a private pilot’s license.

Some eventually switch roles and become flight instructors.

Kyle Fassberger’s instructor would often lower his plane’s engine to idle to simulate how he would handle the aircraft’s failure. The first time that happened, said Fassberger, who expects to graduate from Farmingdale State College’s aviation program in spring 2027, he

“froze up.”

“The more you practice for it, the more proficient you get and it becomes almost second nature if it were to really happen,” said Fassberger, 30, of Queens. “Your training kicks in.”

Strange, but exhilarating

During these simulated emergencies, students look for the safest place to land if left with no other choice, pitch the plane’s nose upward to maintain altitude for as long as possible and run through a memorized checklist to troubleshoot engine and other system issues.

Once they can handle an emergency, they are ready to fly solo.

“It feels strange to have such a responsibility,” Fassberger recalled of his first flight alone, but also “very exhilarating.”

The steep demands on student pilots prepare them to handle an in-flight crisis with their lives, and potentially the lives of others, in the balance, said Stuart Bain, one of Downey’s aviation instructors at BOCES.

“I try and scare them a little bit, like ‘Hey listen . . . we’re teaching you guys to do something that could potentially kill you,’” said Bain, 64. “So if you’re not confident or comfortable being here and doing the work to be here, the door’s over there.”

What awaited the Air Canada pilots on the ground as they guided the Bombardier CRJ900 on final approach allowed them little time to summon their safety training. All appeared normal just before the jet touched down and hit a Port Authority fire truck on the LaGuardia runway as it was responding to another plane. Capt. Antoine Forest and first officer Mackenzie Gunther, both flying for Jazz Aviation on behalf of Air Canada, died on impact. The plane carried 72 passengers and four crew members, the Port Authority said. A total of 41 people aboard the plane were hospitalized.

The crash shocked Juliana Dolezal, 18, a senior at William Floyd High School and a flight student at BOCES.

“It is sad for the pilots that were killed in the collision,” Dolezal said.

No change of plans

Her goal of becoming an airline pilot has not changed.

“At the end of the day,” she said, crashes like the one at LaGuardia “are very rare occurrences.”

Compared to learning how to drive, learning how to fly is



Flight instructor Gregory Suarez with his student Stephanie Arango at Republic Airport in Farmingdale.



Stuart Bain, BOCES aviation instructor



Juliana Dolezal, flight student at BOCES



Harrison Savicki studies at LI Flying



David Veksenfeld, certified flight teacher

“more complicated,” she said. Flight students learn far more procedures and regulations so they can protect pilots, passengers and people on the ground.

Before she took a road test to obtain her New York State driver's license, Dolezal, like all prospective motorists, had to pass a Department of Motor Vehicles knowledge test to get a learner's permit and log 50 hours of supervised driving, 15 of which had to occur after sunset.

Getting her private pilot's license will come only after she has passed a written exam administered by the FAA. She must also log a minimum of 40 hours in the sky — including 10 solo hours, three at night and three more during what's known as “cross-country” flights, where students fly to airports beyond where they train — to earn the necessary “endorsements” from her instructors to take an oral and practical

exam with an FAA-approved examiner in the cockpit.

“That book is very thick,” Dolezal said of the FAA manual she must master. “You need to know a lot and it's a lot to memorize, and it's very important that you know your regulations, because if you don't, you could end up in a bad situation.”

Seal of approval

Endorsements from flight instructors and passing written exams ensure student pilots are ready to fly on their own, just as the DMV's written and road tests gatekeeps access to a learner's permit and driver's license. Students in the two-year aviation program at BOCES need their instructors to provide a similar endorsement at the end of their first year spent in the classroom before they return for year two.

“If we don't think they're going to be trusted enough to be in an airplane with a flight in-

structor, let alone by themselves,” Bain said, “then we don't endorse them to come back.”

High schoolers like Dolezal, Downey and Harrison Savicki, 18, of Stony Brook, have been eligible for a private pilot's license since the mid-20th century, when the federal government set the minimum age for earning a certificate at 17. In 2024, the majority of student pilots nationwide, or 55%, were between 16 and 34, according to the most recent FAA report on active license holders. Just over 8% were between 16 and 19. Approximately 10,700 students were learning to fly, either on airplanes, helicopters or other aircraft, from 3,057 certified instructors in New York State in 2024.

Most students log between 60 and 90 hours in the cockpit before they are ready for their “check flight” to earn their certificate, said Asad Abdullah, the

lead flight instructor at Aspire Aviation.

“No one gets it at 40 hours,” Abdullah, 31, said of the private pilot certificate.

“There's maneuvers you have to excel at before you go up” for the exam, he added. “We practice emergencies, we practice wing fire, engine fire.”

Real world emergency

It was a real world emergency in early March that underscored the risk of every flight for Savicki, who also envisions a future as a commercial airline pilot.

Hours before engine failure forced a Cessna 172 that took off from Long Island MacArthur Airport to land after dark March 2 in an icy stretch of the Hudson River upstate — forcing a flight instructor from Southampton and a 17-year-old flying student from Locust Valley to swim to shore — Savicki said he'd been practicing takeoffs and landings in the same single-engine plane with an instructor from the same MacArthur Airport-based private flight school, Long Island Flying.

He recalled the exercise as “overall a great flight.”

Later that day, the other instructor and his student pilot climbed into the Cessna and embarked on an intended round-trip from MacArthur Airport to New York Stewart International Airport in Orange County.

The pilot, Liam D'Arcy, 31, of Southampton, put the plane down in the Hudson north of New Windsor after radioing to air traffic controllers about his increasingly dire circumstances.

“I don't think we are going to make the airport,” D'Arcy said in an audio recording.

A preliminary report released by the National Transportation Safety Board on March 25 determined the plane's engine “began to run extremely rough before it lost total power.”

“I almost couldn't comprehend it . . . that could have been me in the plane,” Savicki said. “I mean, it was a 17-year-old student after all. It really just put things into perspective.”

Teaching to fly

A full NTSB report, which will detail a “probable cause of the crash along with any contributing factors,” is expected to be released within 12 to 24 months from the day of the incident, agency officials previously told Newsday.

To teach others how to fly, instructors must study more FAA

regulations, log 250 flight hours and pass additional exams to get their commercial pilot license and then become a certified flight instructor, or CFI. David Veksenfeld, a 2024 graduate of Farmingdale State College's aviation program, checked all those boxes. Since he graduated from an accredited four-year aviation program, he only needs 1,000 flight hours to become an airline pilot. Those without a relevant degree need 1,500 hours.

The median annual salary for commercial pilots not flying for airlines stood at about \$123,000 in 2024, but the bottom 10% earned less than \$60,000, according to the most recent U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data available. Airline pilots earned substantially more, with a median annual salary of \$226,600 during the same period.

It can be a “nerve-wracking” journey teaching others on his way to the cockpit of a commercial airline, said Veksenfeld, 22, of Queens, but “if you can teach it, that means you have been able to have mastery of the skills.”

A new airline pilot can expect a salary between \$80,000 and \$90,000, according to Janie Daly, the director of Farmingdale State's aviation center at Republic Airport. But after logging the required hours, pilots may be forced to wait before higher-salaried and more prestigious opportunities arise.

“This is definitely a very cyclical” industry, Daly said. “Right now, hiring is just starting to pick up again. Every few years we go through highs and lows of when the airlines . . . are hiring, and based on where you are in that cycle, it can be much more competitive.”

Close to his goal

With 1,300 flight hours to his name, Gregory Suarez is approaching the end of what has already been an eight-year journey toward getting his airline pilot certificate. As a kid living near Kennedy Airport, Suarez said he marveled at how “big and heavy” planes appeared and wondered how they “could stay in the sky.”

As an adult, he teaches others with a similar childhood fascination at Aspire Aviation to complete his 1,500 hours.

“Most people that end up wanting to [fly], even the kids that are in high school, they have . . . a good maturity level,” said Suarez, 33, of Inwood. “They know it's fun, but also serious at the same time and they treat it as such.”