

# A Group of Local Kids Gather Every Saturday to Build Real, Working Airplanes

In addition to encouraging young people with an interest in aviation, the Teen Aircraft Factory of Manasota is also aimed at helping at-risk kids.

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*Teen Aircraft Factory of Manasota mentor Don Stroud guides Christian Nolan*

On any given Saturday morning, rather than sleeping in late or scrolling TikTok, a small group of middle- and high-school kids make their way to Hangar J3-112 near the northeastern corner of Sarasota Bradenton International Airport. After being buzzed through a secure gate, they begin the work of building an airplane: riveting together sheets of aluminum to make tails and wings, installing avionics equipment and double-checking the extra-thick manual that provides all the instructions they need to get their Vans RV-12iS two-seater up in the air.

Taylor Fairchild, 15, says his parents don't have to drag him out of bed to get to the [Teen Aircraft Factory of Manasota](#) at 9 a.m. It's the other way around. He first learned about the Factory when

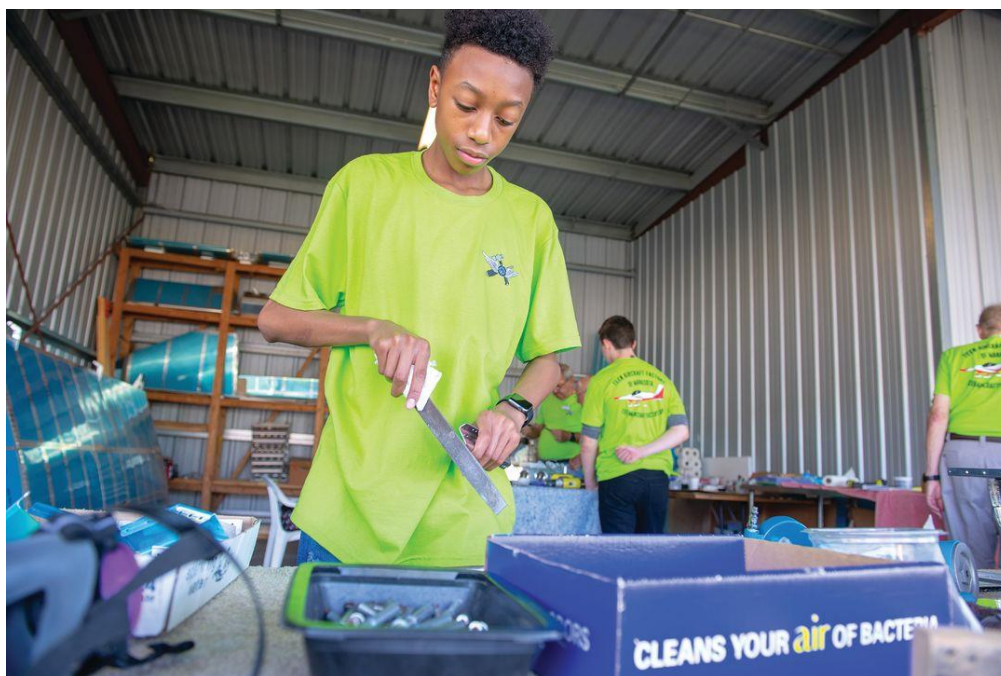
he participated in a Young Eagles flight at the Sarasota airport. The Young Eagles program was created by the local chapter of the nationwide [Experimental Aircraft Association](#). Through it, kids get the chance to take flight with an expert pilot. “I loved it,” Fairchild says. “Ever since then, I’ve been hooked on aviation.”



*Taylor Fairchild*

That’s the goal, says Ron Handley, a longtime amateur pilot who volunteers as a Factory mentor. “We want to expose the kids to aviation and maybe they’ll want to become pilots.” The number of commercial pilots in America has dropped drastically over the past decade, from almost 126,000 in 2009 to less than 100,000 in 2018. According to the Air Line Pilots Association, International, a union that represents more than 63,000 pilots, the high cost of pilot training and low salaries in the industry discourage young people from pursuing aviation careers.

At least for now, Fairchild says he wants to become a commercial pilot. “Going 5,000 feet up, it feels like you’re leaving all your problems on the ground,” he says. “It is such a great feeling.”



*William Morange works in the Factory hangar on a Saturday morning.*

In addition to encouraging young people with an interest in aviation, the Factory, a 501(c)(3), is also aimed at helping at-risk kids. Volunteers work with local police departments and school safety officers to reach out to young people with behavioral problems. The work of the Factory is overseen by a handful of volunteers, many of them retired airline and military pilots.

The process of building an RV-12iS takes about three years. Once completed, the planes must be inspected by the Federal Aviation Administration before being sold. They go for around \$80,000, and that money is then funneled into buying the kit for the next plane. A kit typically costs between \$74,000 and \$88,000, but that amount doesn't cover the cost of renting the hangar, or purchasing and maintaining tools, expenses currently covered by the nonprofit's leaders. The Factory is not yet breaking even.

Now in its sixth year, the Factory is in the middle of building its third plane. The first was bought by a handful of Factory mentors and sits in a hangar near where the kids work. A pilot from New Mexico bought the second; that plane might be soaring above the desert as you read this. Between 60 and 70 kids have put in work at the Factory since it started. Most, but not all, have been boys.



*Kids gather around a completed Vans RV-12iS.*

When he was younger, Dyllan Hunter, now 15, loved playing with Legos. He says building a plane is kind of like that, just on a much bigger scale. “At first, they’re just sheets of metal,” Hunter says. “You never expect it to become an airplane.” Since joining the Factory, Hunter has decided to pursue a career in aviation. Both he and Fairchild have been selected to participate in AirVenture, an annual aviation jamboree that takes place in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Hunter says he loves the “nerves” that hit right when the plane leaves the earth. Plus, “there’s no speed limit.”

Ultimately, Handley says, whether Factory kids end up becoming pilots is maybe not all that important. “We’re not actually building a plane here. We’re building the next generation of leaders,” he says. “It’s all about the kids. The airplane is a byproduct.”