

St. Francis airplane blessing launches new opportunities



Larry Servinsky (left), Nulton Aviation's chief flight instructor, sits in the cockpit of the Diamond DA40 NG with St. Francis student Cross Edwards on Tuesday, Oct. 16, 2018. John Rucosky/The Tribune-Democrat

John Rucosky/The Tribune-Democrat

Gabrielle Garritson came to St. Francis University in Loretto from Houston, Texas, to study criminal justice. The college's new aviation concentration was an unexpected bonus.

"I always thought I wanted to become a pilot," Garritson said following a blessing and christening ceremony for the aviation program's new Diamond DA40 NG aircraft. "My mom was a flight attendant for United (Airlines) for 27 years."

Garritson believes earning her private pilot's license and commercial airline pilot's license may help her achieve her dream of joining the FBI.

"My grandfather and I always watched NCIS," Garritson said at John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport.

“I love forensic science. I could be an FBI surveillance pilot.”

The St. Francis aviation program was developed as a partnership of the university, Nulton Aviation and Johnstown-Cambria County Airport Authority. The goal was to address a nationwide pilot shortage, promote general aviation and encourage economic development around the airport and throughout the region, airport manager Thomas Keyes said at Tuesday’s ceremony.

Any St. Francis student can add the aviation concentration to their course of studies, if their schedule allows, university spokeswoman Marie Young said.

“We are working to write it into our engineering curriculum,” Young said. “It will be part of their plans of study.”

Three other participating students attended the blessing ceremony. They are Andres Barbosa, environmental engineering; Cade Young, general engineering; and Cross Edwards, management.

Tuesday’s ceremony marked more than a new program, airport authority chairman James Loncella said, because the Johnstown airport is poised to benefit from a national resurgence in general aviation – private pilots and business flights outside the realm of scheduled air service and air transport.

“We see the beginning of a turnaround in general aviation,” he said. “This airport and the training facility are well positioned. Our runways are long enough and strong enough to handle anything that flies.”

Loncella credited the vision of leaders at Nulton, St. Francis and state and local government with developing a program that promotes job skills and economic development opportunities.

The Rev. Malachi Van Tassell, university president, prayed for blessings on the plane and those it will carry.

“Grant, we pray, that this airplane will serve to spread your praises and contribute to the well-being of those who fly in it,” Van Tassell said. “Through your blessings, may its pilot and crew operate it with prudence, so the passengers may reach their destinations happily and safely.”

Randy Griffith is a multimedia reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at 532-5057. Follow him on Twitter @PhotoGriffer57.