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:<http://www.bizjournals.com/jacksonville/blog/morning-edition/2014/05/at-risk-youth-group-graduates-inaugural-jaxex-high.html>

May 28, 2014, 5:36pm EDT

At-risk youth group graduates inaugural JAXEX High Achievers Program



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High Achievers — an at-risk youth program created through JAXEX and the Police Athletic League — graduated its inaugural group of students Thursday.

The program was created when the league was looking to expand its academic curriculum, and JAXEX — also known as Craig Airport — wanted more community involvement.

[Tiffany Gillem](#), airport manager for JAXEX, said the program was designed to expose students to aviation and its related careers.

"Typically when I speak to young people, and inquire what they now about aviation jobs, it's always a pilot or flight attendant," she said.

To remedy this, JAXEX sought out help from its tenants and other partnerships, to expose the students to the wide spectrum of aviation-related careers.

Based on positive feedback, Gillem said they will be looking to bring back the High Achievers program for a new group of students.

The group of students, whose ages ranged from 13 to 18 years old, learned about aircraft maintenance and aerial photography through Malone Air Charter, air traffic control through contracted tower operators RVA, Inc. and airport management at JAXEX.

On the last day of the four month program, the students learned about professional development, like what to wear to an interview, how to make a resume and even what mistakes can keep them from getting jobs in aviation.

The group started with 20 participants and ended with 8 graduates— youth members had to show engagement, complete homework assignments, and write an essay at the end of the program.

They learned Jacksonville Aviation Authority's internship program and were able to network with tenants who may provide their own internships, job shadowing or opportunities to tour the facility. Three older students were eligible to attend a summer aviation camp, based on the quality of their essays.

"We're looking for ways to get positive impact for youth," said Gillem. "Hopefully I've opened the door to help them."

[Marshall Wood](#), marketing director for Malone Air Charter, one of the tenants involved with High Achievers, said he saw getting involved not only as a chance to help children, but to also show the economic importance of aviation and how important Craig Airport is for the community.

"Personally I'm just all about that, simply because an airport is not something the average young person, particularly those from minority backgrounds, have any experience with at all," he said. "When I show young folks the world aviation, they're like a kid in a candy store. It amazes them."

Randy [Crews](#), a sergeant with Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, who has worked with PAL for two years, said that PAL and the High Achievers program gets students thinking about options they never thought they had.

"The demographic we serve do not have that opportunity to say, 'hey that's achievable, I can do this,' without someone putting them in the right direction," he said.

[Crews](#) presented the idea of involving PAL with JAXEX after he thought about the own life and the confidence he gained after getting his pilot's license. He said the process is difficult, and being able to do that allows someone to feel like they can achieve anything.

"The confidence aviation gave me is what made me what I am today," he said.

He said PAL is open to the public, and specifically targets children who have not gotten into trouble, but are at-risk for doing so if they didn't have a reason to get involved in the community.

"These are good kids, excellent children," [Crews](#) said.

He said many of the students testified at their commencement that not only did the High Achievers program show them they had options, but that going into aviation is something they want to achieve.

"This is such a unique opportunity," he said. "It's opening up options galore for them."