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SKY'S THE LIMIT

Flight school moves to Hickory

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HICKORY

Residents near Lake Hickory might have seen Susan Van Fleet's seaplane cruising nearby, but she's not always the one flying it.

Fear not. The longtime flight instructor moved her flight school to Hickory Regional Airport in December.

The move to Hickory was a business decision, and since January, she's added seven new students. Previously, the school was at Foothills Regional Airport in Morganton and Abingdon, Va.

"I see a potential for getting kids into aviation, and I love doing the scenic flights, too," Van Fleet said. "There's more opportunity for doing that. So, it's a good business move on my part."

Van Fleet also flies birthday parties where brave passengers can take the wheel.

"I help them take it off and I help them land it, and most of the time, they can fly," Van Fleet said.

The scenery of the area is a big hit.

"Most of them want to go to Grandfather Mountain, come down at Linville Gorge, across the lake and follow the Catawba (River) and then, they find their house, or their school or their work," Van Fleet said. "The little kids'll go, 'That's my dog! That's my dog!'" Van Fleet often lands her seaplane on Lake James and Lake Hickory. She said the boaters tend to like it. The area's beauty is one of the reasons Van Fleet moved to the area.

"There's not very many places prettier than North Carolina," Van Fleet said. "You very rarely meet someone anywhere else that's from North Carolina because of the beauty and the people." The stress relief is one of the many reasons pilots tend to have good physical and mental health, Van Fleet said.

"I diet for two months before I go for my physical, and I diet for two months after, and the rest of the year, I eat whatever I want," Van Fleet said.

She worked as a dietitian and pharmaceutical rep when she started taking flight lessons. She started instructing in 1986.

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“Finally, I just said, ‘I’m going to do what I love doing,’” Van Fleet said.

As a career, its stability is not up in the air. Van Fleet said there is a scarcity of pilots nowadays with thousands of jobs opening up in the future. Several other private instructors and the Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute pilot program are hosted at Hickory Regional Airport.

“The Hickory Regional Airport has been fortunate to have a history of pilot instructors based here for many years, supporting the aviation needs of the student pilot,” airport director Terry Clark said.

Van Fleet said students can earn their flying license in about a year to a year and a half, and the cost is between \$6,000\$7,000. Some students have taken as long as five years to graduate.

“I do have the people who think they can learn in a weekend,” Van Fleet said. “That kind of surprises me.”

Having flown since 1971, she’s said she never had a frightening time. But she’s still cautious. Weather is the biggest challenge.

“Mother Nature is not forgiving, and she rules, and that’s my goal to get across to students,” Van Fleet said. “It’s hard to get after somebody, but you have to.”

Van Fleet said it’s a joy to be able to do this for a living.

“Every day is different,” Van Fleet said. “Every single day, the winds are different. The sky is different. The clouds are different. The people are different.”