

Lauren Stettbacher

Age: 19

Hometown: North Fond du Lac

Program: Aviation Management, Associate Degree

Support for high flying career goals

“I’ve always been fascinated with airplanes, and attending the airshows at (EAA AirVenture Oshkosh) every summer really sparked my love for aviation. Ever since my first discovery flight, I knew that being in the air and flying any type of aircraft was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

With this vision, Lauren Stettbacher took bold steps as a teenager to launch into private pilot training. She is well on her way to becoming a professional pilot. Stettbacher is pairing her learning with a full-time schedule at Fox Valley Technical College in the Aviation Management associates degree program and a part-time job at the Fond du Lac County Airport.

It’s a dream that comes at a high cost. Stettbacher’s tuition bill for her first semester was four times what she was offered in financial aid.

Receiving the Sean Paul Gonia Aviation Scholarship from the FVTC Foundation brought her well-deserved relief and encouragement to keep going.

A paying back of help from long ago

“The difference that it made for myself and Sylvia — both of us had scholarships to the University of Illinois and North Carolina State University. We benefitted from scholarships. And, so, it’s paying back. I guess a lot of people talk about paying forward, but I look at it as paying it back.”

Laur Gonia knows well the financial commitment it takes to receive an education in aviation. His son Sean worked hard to apply for and receive many scholarships as he pursued his pilot training at Saint Cloud State University in the 1990s. His untimely death on Sept. 11, 2004, accelerated a plan Laur and Sylvia Gonia had made to establish a scholarship in his name. Sylvia Gonia’s passing on Nov. 17, 2023, prompted a second scholarship, the Sylvia B. Gonia ELL Endowed Scholarship for English language learners.

While not alumni of FVTC, the connection is a strong one. When Saint Cloud State ended its aviation program, the Gonias transferred the scholarship in Sean’s name to FVTC for the reputation of its aviation program, professionalism of the FVTC Foundation as well as Sean’s ties to the Oshkosh area through EAA AirVenture and Explorers. They also valued

FVTC's commitment to serving immigrants by assisting them to assimilate to life in the United States through ELL classes. A first-generation Lithuanian, Sylvia learned English in grammar school and taught her mother to speak and read English.

Meeting recipients like Lauren Stettbacher is deeply meaningful, says Laur Gonia, and enriches the legacy that he and his daughter, Tara, and two grandchildren celebrate when they remember Sean and Sylvia.

A role model for future aviators

Stettbacher expects to graduate from FVTC next May. Meanwhile, she has achieved several milestones on her path to earning a pilot's license and is a proud volunteer pilot for the EAA Young Eagles program. She has taken 17 young people on their first flights so far.

“Receiving this scholarship has made a huge difference for me. It helped ease some of the financial burden, but more importantly, it encouraged me to know that others believe in my potential and want to support my education. That support has given me a big boost of confidence and motivation to keep working hard and moving toward my goals.”