

HS kids the wind beneath our wings

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By Denis Hamill

These students have their heads in the clouds. Be grateful.

A few weeks ago I sat in on a special class at Aviation High in Long Island City listening to a sharp, impressive collection of young men and women, some of whom we will entrust our very lives to when we board the flying machines that launch us into the jittery skies over New York from LaGuardia, JFK and Newark airports.

These students were finishing up a special four-week program taught through English and social studies by teachers Pat Brown and Sgt. Willie Williams of the United States Air Force, in which the class read and discussed an excellent book called "Reclaiming the Sky: 9/11 and the Untold Story of the Men and Women Who Kept America Flying," by Tom Murphy, from which all proceeds go to aviation charities. (Murphy even got Five Star Parking at JFK to buy the books for Aviation High.)

"The purpose of this course is to help prepare the next generation of aviation workers for the challenges of a new, nervous world by exposing them to 'core principles' held by the best from this generation," says Murphy. "Especially the three core principles at the heart of aviation professionalism: duty, teamwork and action." Murphy's book breaks those three qualities down this way:

1 DUTY: a) If you start a job, finish it; b) Get the facts, and keep getting them. First facts are often incorrect; c) Be accountable, take responsibility for your decisions.

2 TEAMWORK: a) No man is an island, make connections with others; b) Get support when you need it, give it when you can; c) Communicate. Avoid isolation. Tell the truth.

3 ACTION: a) Focus and DO. Identify your customer's NEED and act to meet it; b) When grieving or hurt, look for something you can DO for someone, no matter how small it may seem, and that will help you move forward.

This book is filled with the personal stories of fortitude and bravery of ordinary airline workers thrust into an extraordinary crisis on the day our nation came under attack. Using the details from the worst day in American aviation history, these Aviation High students found keen insight into

"the leadership principles" they would need to apply in a life in aviation in a post 9/11 world.

"These principles will enhance their decision-making skills and capacity for empathy," Murphy told me before the class. "These kids wrote essays about the book. Unbelievable the way they were able to relate lessons from the stories in the book to losses in their own lives, including parents, siblings, friends and more. I'm floored. These kids just get it. These kids have the right stuff."

In class, Murphy read aloud some of those essays, heart-wrenching personal stories about life, loss and regret from which these kids found connections to the events of 9/11 and future crises. Looking around the room I realized that these kids will be the air beneath our wings in the terror age. By the time the bell rang for the next period I was feeling a little better about the future of air travel in our wounded city. Especially since the same course will be taught at Vaughn College of Aeronautics in Queens in September.

"About 85-90% of our students go on to college," says Eileen Taylor, Aviation's feisty and popular principal and Queens native whose school is celebrating its 50th anniversary. "They take regular academic courses and two shops in aviation in freshman year, three in sophomore and four in junior and senior year. By the time they graduate they are prepared to go into college or directly into the aviation business at our local airports and around the country."

Taylor was so protective of her kids she asked me not to use their names. But not all the kids go directly to the local airports. Some told me they'd spoken to recruiters from the military, NASA, the MTA, the automotive industry and from murkier places. "We have a sheet metal shop teacher who used to be a CIA agent," brags one student.

"Some students have become teachers, doctors, psychiatrists. Bottom line it's just a great high school that prepares you for life." All the kids nodded. "I want to be a JAG lawyer for the Air Force," said one young woman. "I will get the fundamentals of aviation here, and then I'll go to law school, and be a military lawyer."

They all said reading "Reclaiming the Sky" gave them a deeper understanding of what it was like for aviation industry workers on and since 9/11.

"It's a brand new world," said one kid. "That's the world we'll be working in." Great kids. Great school.

By the time I left Aviation High, I was feeling a whole lot better about the next generation who will be reclaiming our skies.

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