

Flight for excellence

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mccross3@tulane.edu



Al Ely Edwards II, (back row, left) a licensed pilot and a 2016 graduate of the Tulane Executive MBA program, rewards the scholastic achievement of local middle school students with an aerial tour of New Orleans. (Photo provided by Al Ely Edwards II)

For the last five years, real estate mogul Al Ely Edwards II has been lifting the spirits of outstanding students from public elementary and middle schools throughout the Greater New Orleans region. Edwards is the creator of an enrichment program called Flight for Excellence, which recognizes scholastic achievement by granting kids a one-of-a-kind reward — an aerial tour of New Orleans' skyline.

A 2016 graduate from the [Executive MBA](#) program offered by the [A. B. Freeman School of Business](#), Edwards is president of [Ely Edwards Enterprises](#), a rental property and construction company founded in 2001.

Edwards started attending a local flight school in 2005. As the arrival of Hurricane Katrina interrupted his course, he resumed learning to become a pilot in Houston after evacuating.

“I’ve always had an interest (in flying). We all have that interest in some way,” said Edwards.

A board member of Fannie C. Williams Elementary Charter School, Edwards originally began the Flight for Excellence program in 2012 as a unique way to enhance student enrollment while recognizing children who excelled in the classroom.

For the program’s inaugural year, 30 students selected from grades 5 through 7 took off from New Orleans Lakefront Airport to circle the city. Each spring, the program’s participating schools select a new group for the soaring experience.

Unlike a commercial flight, the students aboard the private aircraft are able to talk and interact with Edwards as he flies.

“In most cases, it’s their first ever flight. They can see the world below them from 1,000 feet up. It’s a different, mentality-expanding experience for them, as they point things out on the ground they’ve never seen before,” said Edwards.

As approximately 100 students have taken part in the program over the years, many of the children have expressed interest in one day becoming pilots themselves.

“I’m interested to see where their paths take them,” said Edwards.

“They can see the world below them from 1,000 feet up.”

Al Ely Edwards II, Flight for Excellence Program