



MCCC Aviation Student Judy Galayda Wins Top Pilot Award in Region VII Competition

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MCCC Aviation Program Coordinator Joseph Blasenstein congratulates Judy Galayda, who took the "Top Pilot Award" at the Intercollegiate Flying Association Region VII Competition this October.

WEST WINDSOR, N.J. -- Last year she won the "Top Female Pilot" award, and this year Judy Galayda of Hamilton took the "Top Pilot Award" at the National Intercollegiate Flying Association Region VII SAFECON Competition, besting 34 male and three other female contestants. The event was held Oct. 23-27 in Schenectady, N.Y.

Galayda has learned that a little experience can go a long way. The Mercer County Community College Aviation Flight Technology student said an extra year of training and studying enabled her to take the top prize this year. "It was tougher than in past years, but it was also nice because we have more experience," Galayda said.

The feat is all the more impressive considering that two extra teams competed this year, making for many more competitors. Mercer finished second in the overall team rankings to Dowling College, a four-year school in New York. Only one other community college, Schenectady County, participated in the competition. In addition to Dowling, the other four-year schools were Delaware State University and Daniel Webster College. Last year Mercer took the top spot in the competition, as it had for several prior consecutive years.

A Hamilton resident, Galayda is a 2007 graduate of McCorristin High School and is attending Mercer through the NJSTARS scholarship program. A Phi Theta Kappa honors student, she recently completed her Commercial Instrument Rating, Multi-Engine Commercial Instrument Certificate, and Flight Instructor Certificate. Her accomplishments resulted in being awarded the "Timothy Burns Memorial Scholarship" for a continuing aviation student this fall.

According to Aviation Program Coordinator Joseph Blasenstein, "Galayda is a unique individual; she is an achiever." When asked how Galayda is viewed by her male counterparts, he said simply, "Competence rules. They accept her."

Galayda said her main preparation for the competition came from twice-weekly meetings of the MCCC Flight Team, a club that convenes as an extracurricular activity, similar to a sports team. Her favorite event is the "Aircraft Preflight Inspection," which involves inspecting the aircraft and recording everything that could possibly go wrong. She took the top award in that category.

Galayda has wanted to be a pilot since she was a young child, and was primarily influenced by her uncle, Tom Galayda, an Air Force Academy graduate who flew in Vietnam and worked as a pilot for United Airlines. "He always told us that he had the best office view in the world," Galayda recalled. Although she initially planned to attend the Air Force Academy, Galayda said various circumstances led her to the program at Mercer. "I'm so glad I found it because the northeast region has busy airspace, which allows you to encounter everything. The changing seasons also make you learn to fly in a full range of conditions. The program here gives us a very strong foundation," she said.

Galayda credits Judie Stillwagon, senior technical assistant and assistant chief pilot, with helping to prepare her. The Flight Team's advisor, Stillwagon said, "The students work very hard to be part of this team. They do all the hard work."

The Flight Team took the top prize in several categories. Galayda scored first in the Simulated Comprehensive Aircraft category. She and teammate Ricky Vetick took first place in the Navigation Ranking, while William Dripps took first place in the Computer Accuracy Ranking. Team members Chris Moyers, Dan Rodgers, Keith Stover and George Swartz scored well in several categories.

Galayda will be finishing up her degree this spring and is considering education classes at Mercer for next fall. She eventually would like to continue at Thomas Edison State College or Rutgers. Joining the military reserves or a regional airline to gain flight time are also possibilities farther down the road. The Flight Team's high score means it is eligible to compete in the national competition in May in Terre Haute, Ind. Stillwagon says the team is looking forward to the competition.

Mercer's Aviation Flight Technology program is one of only two in New Jersey, and the only one with a fleet of airplanes, which are housed at Trenton-Mercer Airport in Ewing. The program draws students from the tri-state region.

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