



Contributed

**Unicoi's Bill Powley will be inducted into the state's Aviation Hall of Fame.**

# Unicoi aviator Bill Powley lands in state hall of fame

■ Induction ceremony set Saturday.

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UNICOI — Bill Powley has reached a new height in his aviation career.

On Saturday, the Unicoi resident will be inducted into the Tennessee Aviation Hall of Fame

at a ceremony in Murfreesboro. While Powley said he is appreciative of the honor, he said the recognition is really for those who have helped on the ground and the students who have taken to the skies through his aerospace programs.

"It's very humbling, but it's also humbling because it's not

me," Powley said. "I didn't walk on the moon. I didn't break the sound barrier. I didn't do some great aviation feat personally. What we did, and I always liken this to 'I am the leader of the band,' and you recognize the leader of the band, but there's a huge band out there. I have hundreds of people to thank. Thousands of kids have bene-

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fited."

When Powley retired from the U.S. Air Force 22 years ago, he had his sights set on working as a pilot with one of the major airlines. This plan would not work out, but while in Florida, Powley said he met a man who was teaching Junior ROTC and sang the praises of the job. Powley's interest would lead him to Unicoi County High School, which had a JROTC for around two decades at the time but had no flying program.

"So I kind of threw my hat in the ring, and my first interview was up here in Erwin," Powley said. "Ronnie Wilcox, the director of schools, and Ellis Murphy, the principal, interviewed me. I said 'Maybe we can start flying some kids and get them excited,' because the ROTC program was on probation at that time. They must have liked that, so they hired me."

But the aerospace program at UCHS nearly failed to get off the ground. In April 1992, the Unicoi

County Board of Education narrowly passed, by a 4-3 vote, having the program become part of the JROTC curriculum at the high school.

"Well, 22 years later that one vote translates into a hall of fame program, which is really pretty neat," Powley said.

Money for the program was initially raised through the sale of aerial portfolios made up of Unicoi County properties photographed during student flight orientations as the plane passed over the area after leaving the Greeneville airport. Powley said \$8,000 was raised through this.

Powley would later contact Mark Leon, director of NASA's Aims Research Center, to see if any monetary assistance could be provided for the aerospace program. Although he was initially told that assistance was unavailable, Powley persisted, and Leon provided the local flying program with a \$10,000 grant. With this contribution, Powley said he was able to fly more students.

Additional grant funding was also provided by the Tennessee Aeronautics Commission, which Powley said has continued to be supportive of his aerospace program.

After 11 years at UCHS, Powley took his program to Air Force JROTC at Kingsport's Sullivan South High School. Although he retired in June, Powley said he will serve as Sullivan County's STEM coordinator for aerospace education. He also intends to start two new schools within the next year, and Powley will be involved in the governor's aviation initiative.

"A lot of people go to school and they learn from the textbook, but they don't get to fly airplanes," he said. "That's a great laboratory when you actually get to solo and fly an airplane."

In 2010, eight years after joining SHHS, Powley was honored with the A. Scott Crossfield Aerospace Education Teacher of the Year Award. He was later awarded the Tennessee Aviation

Person of the Year. In 2011, he received the Career Contribution to Aviation Award from the Tennessee Aeronautics Division.

Powley said he has flown more than 6,700 high school students over the years, with the with the 116th solo flight taking place this past Sunday. He said between 700 to 800 students are flown each year, with around eight annually taking part in solo flights, and he said these numbers continue to grow. For Powley, that's what the flying program is about, and he said it is the excitement that students have for flying that keeps him coming back.

"The neat thing about it is I'm going in for working with kids," Powley said of his induction. "I mean, flying Cessna 152's is not a great aviation feat, but flying high school kids and having this program that is, as they said, the top one in the nation. ... It was the top aerospace science program in the nation, so that's really the deal."

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