Learning to fly at the Sumter County Airport

Markell Ruffin wants to be a military aviator. The 21-year-old Marylander is an Airman 1st Class stationed at Shaw Air Force Base pursuing his dream.

“My overall goal, I want to fly in the Air Force,” he said. Slowly but surely, he’s racking up hours in the air to learn his chosen craft with the help of Freddy Williams, a full-time flight instructor based at Sumter County Airport.

It’s no longer a well-kept secret that flight instruction is available in Sumter, South Carolina. “It’s very busy right now,” said Jeremy Bauer, a co-owner of On Eagle’s Wings, the Fixed Base Operator at Sumter County Airport. The Cessna 172 used for flight lessons is in the air about 60 to 70 hours a month, he said. In addition to Williams, a full-time instructor, there’s Rocky Wall and Steven Montgomery also teaching students how to fly an airplane.

“We’re flying a lot, which is good,” Bauer said. “There has always been steady to busy flight instruction out here, and we’ve been here twenty-plus years.”

Ruffin started flying under Williams’s tutelage last fall, but the young Airman first became enamored with aviation at the now-defunct Osan Air Club when he started flight school in Korea. Just before one of his first flights as he waited just short of the runway, he was in close proximity to several F-15s taking off. “Right in front of me, so it was pretty crazy,” he said.

Ruffin enjoys taking his Go Pro on occasion while aloft and posting some images on social media. “Someone might see it and become inspired to go and follow their dreams, too,” he said.

As the son of a crop duster, Freddy Williams grew up around planes and worked at the local airport in Eufaula, Alabama, prep ing planes and driving the fuel truck. Though he studied music at the University of Alabama, he decided to enlist in the Air Force and spent four years as a flight engineer on an MH-53 Pave Low helicopter. “I enjoyed my time in the military and the camaraderie that it provided,” he said.

He earned his private pilot’s license (PPL) while in the U.S. Air Force and finished his college degree in Professional Aeronautics from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University.

Stints would follow as a Mission Information Manager — working for the Department of Defense as a civilian — and in the private sector in mission planning and support.

“But it wasn’t getting me back up in the air,” he said.

So he went back to being a student and log some hours in his Cessna 150. He earned his instrument rating, his commercial rating and went straight into being an instructor. (See FLYING, Page 3)
Asst. EMS Chief Kent Hall ‘leads by example’

Kent Hall knew early on that he wanted to be a first responder.

“I started off as a junior firefighter with the local fire department,” he said.

His mother Kathy volunteered her services as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) for the Rescue Squad in Bethune.

“Helping her out – that’s kinda how I got into it,” he said.

He guesses he was 16 or 17-years-old when he first served with the Bethune Fire Department.

“When I was a senior in high school I knew this is what I wanted to do,” he said.

A native of Bethune, Hall is the Assistant Chief of Sumter County Emergency Medical Services. He also serves as the Training Officer and often engages with public outreach, teaching students lessons in safety and life.

“I get a lot of satisfaction from that,” he said, referring to sharing practical advice to younger folks.

He and his wife Tonya have two daughters, Carsyn, 15, and Chansyn, 6.

“Just like most people here I’ve got kids myself,” and so he wants to offer his experience, knowledge, “and heartache and adversity – and how to overcome that – and see them apply that to their lives,” he said. “That’s very satisfying.”

When he was younger and knew he wanted to pursue being a first responder as a career, he started taking nursing classes at Florence-Darlington Technical College while working EMS in Lee County at the same time.

Hall became a certified EMT just before he was set to begin second semester at FDTC when he told his boss in Lee County that paramedic school was his preference.

Working and going to paramedic school at the same time “was rough,” he said.

About two-thirds of the way through, he got married and about a month after that, a bad ambulance wreck fractured bones on his spine. So he finished paramedic school in a brace, thankful his wife could take care of him.

“It was a challenge,” he said.

Once he “tested out” or became nationally certified as a paramedic, he got on full time with Lee County EMS.

“Pretty good year that first year,” he said, as he was named Employee of the Year for the county. “I had some good mentors.”

After a few years running calls in Lee County, he came aboard with Sumter County as a paramedic, which was “almost like culture shock,” he said, laughing. He went from a quiet post with only a few calls a day to running calls constantly.

“And you come to Sumter and the wheels are turning the whole time you’re here,” he said.

In 2005 he was promoted to sergeant and recognized by the American Legion Post 15 as the top EMS officer of the year.

“Pretty cool for being my first year,” he said.

A promotion to training officer and captain came a year later and he held those posts until January 2010 when he went to work for First Health and was based in Chesterfield County.

“It was an opportunity to get experience as a supervisor,” he said. “If I wanted to advance my career I needed experience in that area.”

During that time, his son Caden was born and sadly passed away after four and a half months. It was during this difficult time that Hall relied heavily on his Christian faith.

His faith, he said, “means the world.”

In addition coaching his oldest daughter’s travel ball team, he coaches a year-round Fellowship of Christian Athletes softball team.

“I love the coaching aspect of it, but it’s a spiritual thing, too,” he said.

They have devotions at the ballfield and spend plenty of time reading the Bible and praying, he said. Hall also serves as an Associate Pastor at DayStar Mission Church in Bishopville.

(See HALL, Page 4)
As a Certified Flight Instructor (CFI), he’s been full-time at the Sumter County Airport for almost two years, teaching students how to fly. In doing so, he’s also had to learn the psychology of learning.

“You have to learn to become a good teacher,” he said. “You have to realize everyone doesn’t learn the same way you do, so you have to prepare multiple ways to teach the same subject to match the learning style of your student.”

Watching a student become proficient in the ways of aviation is “definitely a proud moment,” said the 41-year-old Alabama native. “The enjoyment from seeing they can do it by themselves.”

He’s heard plenty of stories from folks talking about how they always thought about getting their pilot’s license. “They don’t realize all it takes is making an appointment and showing up at the airport,” he said.

There’s a process and requirements, but it’s easy to start, he said.

“For more information, call the Sumter County Airport at (803) 436-4639.

http://www.sumtercountyairport.com/
Sumter County Gallery of Art opens two new exhibits, on display until April 10

Two new exhibits opened on Feb. 27 at the Sumter County Gallery of Art.

‘The Supper Table’ and Maria Britton’s ‘Dream Bodies’ will be on display until April 10.

According to Karen Watson, executive director of the Sumter County Gallery of Art, ‘The Supper Table’ pays homage to Judy Chicago’s 1979 feminist art installation ‘The Dinner Party.’

The concept behind ‘The Dinner Party’ was to bring greater attention to the contributions of women to Western culture and history. Forty years later, ‘The Supper Table’ celebrates the contributions of 12 extraordinary South Carolina women and features the work of almost 60 of the state’s outstanding contemporary women artists in the visual, literary, theatrical and film arts.

‘The Supper Table’ is the creative vision of Cindi Boiter, the Editor of Jasper Arts Magazine, and an important and passionate advocate for the arts in South Carolina, Watson said.

The women honored at ‘The Supper Table’ are: Mayesville’s Mary McLeod Bethune, Alice Childress, Septima Clark, Matilda Evans, Clarendon County’s Althea Gibson, Angelina & Sarah Grimke, Eartha Kitt, Sarah Leverette, Julia Peterkin, Eliza Pinckney, Modjeska Simkins and Elizabeth Evelyn Wright.

DREAM BODIES

This installation presents recent works by mixed media artist Maria Britton, who uses combinations of painting and sewing to construct textile-based wall works from worn bed sheets.

The surface of the bed is a place where one experiences and escapes reality, from Britton’s perspective, and she transforms patterned bed sheets into flowing forms that hover between painting and sculpture.

The Sumter County Gallery of Art is located at 200 Hasel Street and is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday. For more information call (803) 775-0543 (HALL, from Page 2)

“I’ve never had a fear for helping somebody, regardless of the outcome,” he said. “Helping people is why I do it.”

In the Spring of 2019, Hall won a statewide award, the Jack Niles Award for Outstanding Achievements in EMS Education. Chief Bobby Hingst, the EMS Director, told County Council members that Hall had recently spearheaded joint training with the Sumter County Sheriff’s Office, has taken it upon himself to spread the word about Stop the Bleed kits used in emergency situations and also recently taught an Advanced EMT Course.

“It is an honor and a blessing to be an employee of Sumter County,” Hall told the audience gathered at that meeting. “Every day I come to work I know I’ve got support from my boss, my staff, and I know I’ve got the support of each and every one of you, so it is truly an honor and a blessing.”

Chief Hingst said Hall’s love for his community, his desire to teach and his strong work ethic are all apparent to the EMS and first responders in Sumter County.

“Kent leads by example and is always there to help out however he can,” he said. “He’s a tremendous asset to Sumter County Emergency Medical Services and to our region and I’m proud to work alongside him.”
March happenings in Sumter County, S.C.

6 & 7 **Swan Con 2020** - Friday at USC Sumter for a panel discussion and Saturday at Patriot Hall. Meet some creators, watch a movie, dress up for cosplay contest. **FREE EVENTS**

13 **Art a la Carte** at Sumter County Gallery of Art - Paint your own calming cherry branch to end a hectic week. Bring wine and a friend, 21 years old and up, $35 per participant.

16 **SAFE Federal** Annual Membership meeting at Sumter County Civic Center

19 **Farm to Table** at Sumter County Civic Center, hosted by Sumter Rotary Club

21 **Columbia City Ballet** performs ‘Cinderella’ at Patriot Hall

22 **The Knot Mountain Bike Race** at Poinsett State Park, part of the South Carolina MTB Championships

24-26 **Statewide DNR Archery** competition at Sumter County Civic Center **FREE EVENTS**

27 **Gallery After Hours** at Sumter County Gallery of Art

29 Chamber music from ‘Decoda’ at Temple Sinai Jewish History Center

[www.sumtercountysc.org](http://www.sumtercountysc.org)