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Female pilot from Dufferin recognized to receive Rising Star Award at upcoming gala

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

A pilot from Dufferin County is being recognized for her contributions and leadership in the aviation industry with a prestigious award.

Heather Hills, a resident of Orangeville, has been announced as a recipient of the Rising Star Award from Northern Lights Aero Foundation (NLAF).

Each year, the Northern Lights Aero Foundation (NLAF) grants the prestigious Elsie Awards, recognizing Canadian women who have made a significant contribution to aviation or aerospace.

Named after aviation pioneer and human rights activist Elsie Gregory MacGill, the award is given to outstanding women across seven categories ? Business, Education, Engineering, Flight Operations, Government, Rising Star, and Trailblazer.

The Rising Star Award, which Hills is a recipient of, is granted to a woman between the ages of 16 and 30 who has demonstrated exceptional promise of leadership and contribution in any area of aviation and aerospace or in a volunteer capacity.

Hills was nominated by a previous Elsie Awards winner and was chosen as a recipient by a panel of judges.

?It's hard to put into words. I started getting involved with this organization when I was at the beginning of my flight training. Being on the other side is pretty surreal because I remember going to my first gala and hearing about all these women, and just being in awe,? said Hills. ?Six year later, being one of the recipients is very cool and it doesn't feel real.?

A significant part of the Elsie Awards is that it highlights the contributions of women within the aviation and aerospace industry.

According to the Canadian Owners and Pilots Association (COPA), women represent approximately seven per cent of pilots in Canada. The Institute for Women of Aviation Worldwide (iWOAW) reports that in 2023, Canadian women received 12 per cent of the 6,354 pilot licences issued by Transport Canada, which is a more than 58 per cent increase from 2010.

?When I was younger, I never saw a female pilot so that's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about doing girls in aviation events. Representation is so important,? said Hills. ?If you can see yourself doing something, you're more inclined to work towards it and dream about it.?

Hills began flying recreationally in the summer of 2015, before going to York University to study Business Administration at the Schulich School of Business. After graduating from university in 2019, Hills enrolled in an almost two-year intensive program with the Brampton Flight Centre, which she completed in 2021.

?About two years into my degree, I sort of realized that I didn't want the typical nine to five and I wanted to go back and explore flying,? explained Hills.

Following the completion of her aviation program, Hills worked as a flight instructor with the Brampton Flight Centre. In 2022, she joined Porter Airlines as a First Officer and has since been promoted to Captain.

In addition to her flying career, Hills also serves as program coordinator for the aviation program at Conestoga College and is set to

begin teaching an introduction to aviation course at the college in September.

She also sits as vice president of the Upper Canada Chapter of Women in Aviation and sits on the board for the 2026 Canadian Women in Aviation Conference, having previously co-chaired in 2024.

Hills was a part of the Northern Lights Aero Foundation's mentorship program as a mentee and was later selected to be part of the Junior Board, which she sat on for a three-year term from 2021 to 2024.

Hills will be presented with the Rising Star Award during the 16th Annual Northern Light Aero Foundation Awards Gala on Oct. 4 in Toronto.