

By Jay Levine
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The Stratospheric Observatory for Airborne Astronomy holds great promise as a desperately needed path to awakening an apathetic public and “lighting them up” with awe-inspiring science.

That is the view of Erik Lindbergh – grandson of pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh – who has inspired many with his own exploits re-enacting his grandfather’s historic transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. His reenactment flight was made in 2002 – 75 years after his grandfather’s original journey in 1927.

In recent weeks, Erik Lindbergh has handled the duties of rededicating the Boeing 747SP SOFIA aircraft as Clipper Lindbergh, first dedicated 30 years ago when it still was a Pan American airliner. Lindbergh’s grandmother – Anne Morrow Lindbergh, an accomplished aviatrix in her own right – presided over the original dedication.

Lindbergh rededicated the aircraft for a first time at L-3 Communications Integrated Systems in Waco, Texas, on May 21, when a plaque was unveiled commemorating the occasion, and then again at the June 27 Dryden event. Modifications made to the plane to ready it as a flying observatory were made at the Waco facility.

At Dryden, Lindbergh climbed stairs leading to the aircraft’s fuselage and pulled a red, white and blue banner off to reveal the name “Clipper Lindbergh” as the crowd counted down from 10.

His grandfather’s flight inspired people everywhere and helped fuel a new perspective on aviation, Lindbergh said in remarks prior to the unveiling. Leaving behind a view of those who flew as daredevils and barnstormers, pilots who would carry passengers came to be seen with awe and respect. Simultaneously, the possibilities commercial aviation held began to emerge. “What’s outstanding about this aircraft and that connection to the Pan Am naming of Clipper Lindbergh and my grandmother dedicating it, is that it represents that man in most of his life,” Lindbergh said.

Charles Lindbergh was a thinker, his grandson noted, a man who in addition to his flying achievements tried to solve the great riddles of his time and considered not only emerging technologies, but the ramifications inherent in them. The inspiration created by the 1927 flight, Erik Lindbergh said, is mirrored in the SOFIA 747SP aircraft.

Education elements planned as part of the SOFIA program, including the possibility of educators traveling with program scientists, serve as examples of what is needed to inspire a new generation of scientists and explorers, he said.

“This is an age of tremendous apathy, when we have all kinds of threats facing us. Not just wars, but global warming and environmental threats,” Lindbergh said. “We don’t feel like we can affect the outcome. We can switch bulbs, or buy a hybrid (vehicle), but will that really do anything?”

Answers, he emphasized, lie in education and renewed commitment to discovery.

“The only way that is going to change is through education.” Gesturing toward the SOFIA, he said, “This is going to be an extraordinary platform for that education that will hopefully ignite one of those people who is touched by this program, that will enable the breakthroughs we need – that our children need, that our children’s children need to thrive and survive into the future. I truly believe that we are but in our infancy in terms of expanding and exploring human potential.

“(The SOFIA) represents a fantastic step, one that I hope will bring us to that future.”

Lindbergh also delivered a presentation in the afternoon at Dryden comparing his flight with that of his grandfather’s. In addition to Lindbergh, Dryden employees welcomed several dignitaries during the June 27 event, held in hangar 4802. Speakers addressed the universe full of opportunities that the SOFIA science programs will spawn when the observatory is fully operational, and the partnerships that will help it reach new heights in airborne astronomy.

Other speakers at the event included Center Director Kevin L. Petersen; Ames Research Center Director Peter Worden; Richard Howard, deputy director of the NASA Astrophysics division; and Werner Klinkmann, German Aerospace Center deputy head of space science.