

'I'm just incredibly stoked and excited for what's next,' says TY student Muireann Bagley

CHRISSIE RUSSELL

A teenager from Dublin is flying high this week after becoming Ireland's youngest qualified pilot.

Muireann Bagley landed the achievement after passing the complex practical exam on the same day as her 17th birthday.

"It feels unreal," said the transition-year student.

"I've been working toward this for as long as I can remember. Luckily the weather was perfect, and I'd no school the day of my flight test, so it's been a very good birthday."

Muireann sat her one-and-a-half-hour long skills test for her Private Pilots Licence (PPL) at Navan Airfield, home to the High Kings Flying Club and High Kings Aviation Ltd, where she has been taking lessons and logging solo hours of flying for the past year.

The PPL flight exam, which was preceded by nine complex written tests, saw Muireann have to plan a navigation route, deal with an unforeseen detour, complete air-work manoeuvres, including stalls, turns, engine-failure protocols, forced landings, glide approaches and more.

"It's very full on," she said.

"We go over all the procedures so much in training I could do them from memory, but there are things you can't predict on the day and the examiner asks a bunch of theory questions, so you just have to learn as much as you can."

Muireann's mum, Caroline Curley, who works as a pilot for Aer Lingus (her dad, Stephen is also a pilot, for Virgin Atlantic) admitted she had been anxious during the test, but not because of aspects such as forced landings or dealing with engine failure.

"None of that stuff worries me because I know all of that's been extremely well prepped and she's very confident on it, but there's always the unknown," said Ms Curley.

"Anything could happen in the air and you have to be ready for it, be adaptable and resilient.

"I'd be confident she would be well up for the challenge.

"But on a flight test literally anything can happen."

Flying was Muireann's passion from a young age. She is the youngest of four siblings and the only one keen to follow in her parents' aviation footsteps.

At age seven she had a flight-simulator game she loved to play and at 11 years old she had an introductory flight experience in Waterford with Laura Russell, who flies for Aer Lingus and competes in aerobatics for Ireland – something on Muireann's radar.

Paying for her flying lessons, usually around €210 an hour, with her own savings, often from Communion and Confirmation money, it was Muireann's commitment to flying that helped her get over the door at Navan Airfield, which usually doesn't take students under age 18.

"We're immensely proud of Muireann," said Rhys Kellett of Navan Airfield, about the young pilot's achievement.

"She really applied herself and excelled through each stage of her training and certainly opened my eyes to the commitment a young person can put into this.

"Her instructor, Bláithín, and everyone



Muireann, pictured on a flight in June last year, likes to sing Katy Perry songs as she flies

'It's been a very good birthday': Fledgling aviator (17) youngest ever to qualify as pilot in Ireland



Muireann Bagley doing her first flight, aged 11 and right, being congratulated by flight examiner Trevor Kellett

at Navan are delighted for her and really do hope that in years to come, Muireann might qualify as a flight instructor herself and come back and maybe take on a young student like she was taken on," added Mr Kellett.

"But I've no doubt that it'll be onwards and upwards for this great young lady."

In November Muireann spoke to *The Sunday Independent's Life* magazine about enjoying singing Katy Perry songs to herself at the controls of a small, two-seater Robin HR200, while notching up the 10 hours of solo

flying needed in pursuit of her PPL. But there was no blasting out *Roar* during her skills test. "No, no singing this time," she laughed. "I wish I could have."

She celebrated her birthday, and licence, with a Cajun chicken burger dinner and a trip this weekend to Washing-

ton DC with her mum, who naturally is piloting their Aer Lingus flight. "It's a little birthday treat, bringing her with me," said Caroline. "She deserves it after all the hard work she's put in. It's been an epic couple of months and her dad and I are both so proud and so grateful for all the support she's had from the team in Navan and her superb instructor."

Being beside her mum at the controls at 30,000 feet one day is high on Muireann's agenda, who hopes to start pursuit of her commercial pilot's licence once the Leaving Cert is behind her.

"To be flying in the cockpit with my mum would be the dream," said Muireann, then laughed. "Although I know she'd be the strictest pilot I'd ever fly with."

For now, though, the next item on the to-do list is much closer to ground: sitting her theory test towards getting her driver's licence.

"And I can't wait to take my parents up for spins," added Muireann smiling. "I'm just incredibly stoked and excited for what's next."