

EDUCATION

Taking flight for future

Bemidji company continues to grow; honors late founder with scholarships to students pursuing aviation careers

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BEMIDJI — A jet gleams on the tarmac, representing the next step in business for Bemidji Aviation.

The company, founded in 1947, was purchased by Larry Diffley and Mark Shough in 1970 with three employees and three planes. Diffley and Shough brought with them their own Cessna 150, bringing the total fleet at the time to four.

That fleet now stands at 43, plus the new jet recently made available to its customers. The jet is headquartered in Minneapolis, but Bemidji Aviation accesses the aircraft when requested.

The CitationJet is faster, about 150 to 160 mph faster than other Bemidji Aviation aircraft. For example, depending on its load, it can get to Dallas in about two and a half hours versus five or six.

"This is the next step in growth," said Tracie Walter, director of operations for Bemidji Aviation, which became employee-owned in 2006.

"As we're seeing more ... businesses growing significantly, there's more transportation needs," said Eric Walter, the chief pilot.

Diffley, 74, died unexpectedly in 2012, when his plane crashed during an aerial pipeline survey near Chicago. Shough said he and Diffley had talked about this next phase of business together, but it didn't fit into the business plan until just recently.

"Every day, it was saying

we've got to do everything we can do to promote business," Shough said, reflecting on the growth of the past 44 years. "By doing that, this is what's happened. We didn't really have a goal, to be (at a certain point) by 10 years ... but we were going to try — and this is what happened. You hire good people and away you go."

Hiring strong employees has been a focus for the company, which now has about 60 employees, including 24 pilots.

Eric Walter said the industry is now beginning to experience a shortage of pilots and Bemidji

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Aviation is doing what it can to combat that. The company offers Learn to Fly courses and an introductory "discovery flight," through which potential pilots-to-be can take control of an airplane, under direct supervision, to get a taste of piloting a plane.

"I just remember how differently things look from the air," Eric Walter said, recalling his first training flight as a teenager. "I grew up here, I grew up two miles south of here, and I thought I knew what the lay of the land was, where the roads ran. And then (you're up in the air), seeing that lake's over there, that road runs there. The first couple of times you fly, all the things you realize how they really look, it's pretty cool."

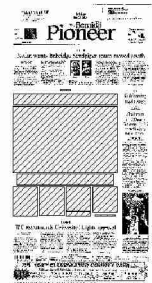
KEEPING IT GOING

Those experiences are now being passed on. In the wake of Diffley's death, his children established the Larry Diffley Memorial Aviation Scholarship Fund with the Northwest Minnesota Foundation.

"One of his concerns running Bemidji Aviation was always, 'Will we have enough top-notch pilots?'" said Jennifer Benjamin, Diffley's daughter, emphasizing her father and Shough always sought to hire the most experienced pilots they could.

While family never spoke with Diffley about an aviation scholarship while he was alive, it had established the Mimi Diffley Memorial Scholarship Endowment with the Sanford Health Foundation of Northern Minnesota after Diffley's wife, Mimi, died in 2007 of breast cancer. That fund provides scholarships for Sanford Health employees wanting to further their education and advance their careers. Mimi Diffley herself worked as a nurse for North Country Health Services for more than 20 years.

The first two \$1,000 aviation scholarships were just recently awarded, to Devin Wiseth of Thief River Falls and Lukah Wesloh of Stillwater. According to his Facebook page, Wiseth is working at Bemidji Aviation and is studying aviation mechanics at



The Pioneer

Date: Friday, July 25, 2014
Location: BEMIDJI, MN
Circulation (DMA): 6,442 (15)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (D)
Page: 1,5
Section: Main
Keyword: Northwest Minnesota Foundation

Northland Community and Technical College. Wesloh works as a ramp agent for Delta and is studying commercial aviation at Academy College in Bloomington.

"It is a big help," Wesloh said of the scholarship. "It's approximately 10 hours of flying time, all told, which can be the difference between getting a job and not getting a job."

His dream job is to be a major airline pilot but said he expects to do several other jobs along the way, perhaps even working for Bemidji Aviation at some point. Right now, he is a bag handler for Delta at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport.

"I love it," he said of the job. "There's hard times but it's always a good reminder of what I want to do. It's a reminder I'd

rather be flying the planes than loading bags the rest of my life. But it has its times and it's fun to be out there."

The scholarships are intended to honor Diffley, who frequently trained new pilots and helped those developing their skills obtain their requisite flight hours, Benjamin said.

"After Dad died, he received so many letters from people who we didn't even know he had trained," she said. "Our family didn't even realize all of the things he was doing to help pursue their dreams of becoming a pilot."

There are several steps involved to become a pilot, especially if one is looking to do so professionally. First, you would obtain a private lesson and then get your instrument rating for flying in more diffi-

cult weather. Beyond that, you would obtain a commercial license, be certified for charter flights, multi-engine planes and more.

"It's not an inexpensive endeavor to become a pilot," said Tracie Walter, a pilot herself. "And you really have to have some dedication to be able to do it."

The scholarship, she said, is designed to target those individuals who definitely want to make aviation a career.

"Whenever you would hear Larry talk about up-and-coming pilots, he did it on his own. He made his own money and figured out how to do it," she said. "He always looked for that person that ... had the dedication to go out there and work their butt off for it ... not willing to take no for an answer."



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Paul Shough, vice president of Bemidji Aviation, and Mark Shough, who purchased the company in 1970 with Larry Diffley, review the new CitationJet that Bemidji Aviation is now leasing to offer increased services to customers.

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