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With EXCEL Air Services, Inc.

BY CHERI SHELHART

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Business Name: EXCEL-Air Services, Inc.**Address:** 2326 W. Clark St., Rensselaer**Contact Info:** 219-866-5587**Website:** www.excelairservices.com**Owner:** John Sjaardema**Opening Date:** EXCEL-Air Services opened in Rensselaer in March 2000.**What does this business do?**

Our main purpose is to do aircraft maintenance and servicing. Every airplane has to have an annual inspection done. If you do one on Dec. 5, you have to have the annual inspection each year by the 31st. We mostly do annual inspections and major repairs, alterations, avionics, interior refurbishing, and all realms of aircraft maintenance is done here. We are known as 'Grumman Gurus of the Midwest.' We do a lot of Grumman planes. Grumman is a name given to a manufactured plane, like Pipers, Cessnas, Beach Craft. A lot of military airplanes are made by Grumman. There are very few shops who know these planes as well as we do here. There's not another one until you get to Comfort, Texas. We're one of the biggest Grumman shops in the country working on these airplanes right now.

What was the impetus for opening this business?

I was a missionary in Nigeria for seven years. When I left, my wife and I moved back to DeMotte and I opened a business, 'New Kent Aircraft Servicing,' out of Kentland from 1982 to 1989. I moved my business to DeMotte in 1989. I was there until 2000. In 1999, Mike Smith, our state representative at the time, knew there was a need to get aircraft maintenance on this airport in order for it to grow. So he contacted me to asked if I would be interested in making the move to Rensselaer to take over the airport, and also try to move my business here. I jumped at that opportunity because it had a paved runway, not a grass runway like DeMotte. The chances of developing the airport as well as my own business was much greater. The impetus was not only to help Jasper County Airport grow, but to also have my own business have a greater potential for customer service growth and serving more people that way. It was a good move.

What is the best thing about being located in Jasper County?

We have a lot of things going for us demographically as well as location. We're located almost exactly half way between Chicago and Indianapolis. I can draw business from both the north and the south plus being near I-65 allows us to get truck transportation for engines in here and passengers can get buses to both cities and come into this airport, so it's a nice location for drawing up two pretty good size metropolitan areas. Being in the country environment, it's a quiet airport but it has a lot of things going for it. It's changed a lot since 2000.

What is the biggest challenge?

It is difficult to keep flight schools going here. There is

a shortage of flight instructors and pilots in the airline industry. It is taking all the pilots and instructors, so it is hard to keep them around. It's a good thing because once their done with school, they are practically guaranteed job, but it's a bad thing because the instructors keep getting taken away by these airliners. The biggest challenge I have is having a flight instruction that's viable and growing and being connected to a good school. There's dialog between Ray Seif and these universities to get a curriculum in the university. We are also working very closely with the high schools in the area, in fact it's just been approved in the last couple of weeks, to get an aviation curriculum here at Rensselaer Central High School. It is a good way to get aviation into the hearts and minds of our young people. I have to give Ray a lot of credit for that.

The other challenge is logistics of where I'm in a sense it's not the easiest if you have to leave an airplane here to get transportation to Chicago or Indianapolis. Lafayette Limo company has gone a long way in that regard. They are willing to pick people up and drop them off at the airport, you just need to make a phone call. That could be developed more. People in Rensselaer could be calling and just leave their car here, it just needs to be developed.

When is your busiest time of the year?

We are busy year-round. My busiest season probably is February through June, when a lot of people want their annual inspections done so the planes are ready for the summer flying season. They don't want to have to take their airplanes down during the season. They want access to their planes from summer through fall, but we're busy all year. This year for sure.

What is the most popular thing you sell/service you provide?

The most demand is the annual aircraft inspections. We have a very loyal customer base that comes back year in and year out. We do about 100 inspections a year. There's a big demand for annual inspections to be sure they are safe and airworthy.

Our mechanics are certified A&P (air frame and power plant) mechanics or are getting on the job training to pursue and obtain their A&P license. Derek, my lead mechanic, and myself are rated as inspectors authorization (IA), higher up tier of ratings. I've been an IA since 1976. We have to report our activity to the FAA. They come and visit, and we do seminars with them and we have ongoing education as much as possible. I also send guys out to schools for certifications.

What is a less popular item/service you would recommend?

We are developing an avionics ability to do avionics work with aircraft. It's not what we're not known for it, but we are becoming more capable of. We are working with certified technicians who are willing to come and help us out. In fact, one of them is renting a hanger here and he will be doing some work out of it and working with us. We'll be working hand in hand with each other.

Avionics is navigational

equipment, GPS, radio, weather radar/radios, communication radios to talk to people on the ground, autopilot systems. That's all considered the avionics side of the plane, the electronics side.

What is the thing you most like to do as part of your business?

The part I love the most is the satisfaction of having an aircraft leave here better maintained and safer than it was when it came in the door, and right along side of that, that the owner/operator of the airplane is more educated, knowledgeable and confident in his aircraft after we've worked on the airplane. I love also just the customer relation side of it. We do a lot of, what we call, 'owner assisted annuals.' They can bring their airplane in here, open it up and look at it, and then we inspect it and teach them things they need to know about their airplanes to make them a safer pilot and make decisions on what we ought to fix or not fix to make the airplane better than it was before. Being able to do that in a personal one-on-one communication is really really important and that communication is what develops a sense of trust between myself and the owner, and that trust then dictates a future long-term relationship with them that they're going to come back year after year. If they trust we know what we're talking about, and they trust that we'll make the aircraft safer, and they trust they can spend the whole year flying an airplane and not worry about it is a huge thing. That's what our goal is to build a sense of trust, a sense of confidence, a sense of just safety that gives them a tremendous amount of confidence in flying out of here at the end of the day.

What is the best thing about owning your own business?

Sjaardema laughs, "It's not being able to take off whenever you want to."

The best part about it is being your own boss, but more importantly being able to steer the business in the direction you think it ought to go. Learn from your mistakes and then try again. Keep redefining and refocusing and reestablishing yourself as a legitimate business in today's changing world, and that's tough. It's really tough, so we have to change and still survive. That's the satisfying part to keep making the business change with the economic environment we're living in and with the changes that are going on and still survive. It's not easy, it's not an easy business to maintain and keep going.

What is the biggest downside?

A sense of ownership, it's not a downside but there is certainly a recognition of the heavy responsibility that comes with this kind of business where people's lives are at stake by the work you do. And therefore quality control and integrity in your work is just utmost, extremely important and that's a heavy responsibility. Every time an airplane rolls out, my name is in the log book. We have to write out every single detail what we did to that airplane and at the end of that entry I have to make a statement that I certify the plane is in airworthy



PHOTOS BY CHERI SHELHART

John Sjaardema, owner of EXCEL-Air Services, Inc., accepts the Business of the Year award from Rensselaer Chamber President Samantha Joslyn at a recent dinner.

condition. And then I put my name in there with my license. The first thing they do is look for the logbooks if there's an accident because they want to know who touched the airplane last. That's a reality I have to sleep with at night.

Every day is critical work, but that also makes my employees become so focused as well, because they know they have to do their work and do a quality job.

What is the biggest misconception about your business?

A lot of people think that because you're working on airplanes, an obviously expensive hobby for a lot of people who own their own airplanes, that you as a mechanic must also be rich because you're working on somebody's airplane, and they think mechanics are wealthy. Well, really, my work is the same as a car mechanic, it's in the service side of it. It's about the work and not the money. I have to work every day just like everybody else. It's a day in day out, pay the bills kind of job. Your overhead is pretty big in a facility like this. You don't overcome those operating cost very easily. You have to be careful about that.

How would you describe your business philosophy?

My business philosophy is based on the scriptures. A verse in Romans 11, says that from Him and to Him and through Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. All of our life, our existence is found in that relationship with the Lord, and I really try to reflect that in my work and in my philosophy. I'm hoping that as people connect with me, and my men, that they will see a Christ-like reflection in us and therefore I want to live that way. I want it to be obvious that there's something different, something special in the way we operate here. For example, you're not going to hear any swear words in this hanger. I won't allow it. It's not part of who we are. It's not going to happen. I try to run my business honestly, fairly and with integrity. I just don't take advantage of people.

When it comes time to retire is there a family member who will be taking over for you?

No. I'm 67 right now. I intend to work until I'm at least 72. I enjoy work too much to retire yet. I'm still going, I've got a lot of work ahead of me yet. I can't imagine what it would be like to wake up and say, 'John, you're not allowed to go to the airport.' I feel like I'm just getting going.

I have employees who are interested in taking over



Planes in various stages of service are disassembled and reassembled as the mechanics work on them at EXCEL-Air Services, Inc. in Rensselaer.



Pilot Bill Steinmetz, of Lake Villa, stands by his plane he brought in to EXCEL-Air Services to have the annual inspection completed. He loves to come to the Jasper County Airport for the inspection because owner John Sjaardema allows the pilots to have hands-on learning while the plane is inspected. Steinmetz planned to put the seats back into the plane himself. He had been in Rensselaer for three days, staying at a local hotel, while every inch of his plane is inspected.

some day, it will probably be purchased from me by my employee staff, and with my connections with the airport board that there is a contingency plan. I am working on that, in that I am letting go of certain parts of my job, and letting one of my guys do that, so that it is easier to walk away when the day comes. We're not there yet. We're going to be here for a long time yet.

How many employees do you have?

I have four full time employees including myself and two part-time employees.

How has your business changed over time?

It's gone up and down. You have to constantly be in flux in changing with the economic times as well as national direction taking place in the aviation community. The best way for me to describe that is that 80 percent of my customer base is over the age of 60, so when you have a customer base that is older and they're slowly letting go of aviation, saying 'That was fun, but I can't do that anymore,' there is not this younger generation of aviators moving up. There is a group of kids who are wanting to become airline pilots, but wanting to just own an airplane, it's just not there. The

challenge of the industry is the aging of the industry and how are we going to get younger aviation enthusiasts to come back in here and fill that void. I've got to try to figure out how to meet that need.

There's potential we could develop this airport as a training facility, but we have a long way to go in that regard.

What advice would you give someone thinking about starting a business?

You have to enter humbly. You have to enter it with a strong desire of communication with your customer base. You have to enter with a lot of flexibility and patience for the changing times we live in. You've got to constantly keep redefining your vision for your business but you've really just got to trust God to lead the way. It takes a lot of trust. You've got to hang in there with an attitude of faith and trust.

EXCEL-Air is open Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is located in a large hanger at the Jasper County Airport. EXCEL-Air was recently named Business of the Year by the Greater Rensselaer Chamber of Commerce.