

"I Couldn't Let It Go"

Generous donations provide hands-on training for aviation students

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A crew from Andrews University's Department of Aviation works to dismantle the "new" jet for transport back to campus.

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In December 2016, the Department of Aviation received a 1981 Lear 25 jet. The plane was donated by InFlight Medical Services International, Inc., who also gave Andrews University a 1966 Lear 23 in 2012.

“The Lear 25 was offered last year at \$50,000 and we couldn’t do it,” says Duane Habenicht, chair of the Department of Aviation. “Unbelievably, the week before Thanksgiving, they offered us the plane again, this time at a cost of \$5,000. I knew we were likely to be told no even for this steal of a deal, but I couldn’t let it go without trying!”

After scheduling an 8:30 a.m. meeting with the vice president for Financial Administration, Habenicht instructed the aviation faculty to “go home and pray.”

“Later that evening, I was working in the machine shop when I felt a strong impression to speak with a local donor about the situation,” says Habenicht. “I don’t like begging for money so I pushed the idea aside.”

Regardless, the impression remained, though Habenicht argued against the voice in his mind for two hours.

The donors, who prefer to remain anonymous, are regular supporters of Andrews University and have a close relationship with the Department of Aviation, yet Habenicht was still reluctant to ask for money. While on his way home that night, he drove past the donors' home, and the voice again urged Habenicht to speak to them.

“Finally, I gave in,” says Habenicht with a chuckle. “I turned down their street and pulled into the driveway. Then I sat in my truck and prayed that this was the right thing to do before knocking on the door.”

Once inside, Habenicht explained the situation and showed the donors pictures of the jet. Without hesitation, they assured Habenicht that they could help and wrote him a check for \$5,000.

The next morning while meeting with the vice president, Habenicht explained his plans for the jet, and mentioned that he was interested in making the purchase.

“I could see his mouth about to form the word, ‘no,’” says Habenicht with a laugh. “At that moment I reached into my pocket, pulled out the check from the donors and slid it across the table to him, saying, ‘By the way, here’s the money to pay for it.’ His response was, ‘Well I guess I can’t tell you no!’”

While getting the funds to pay for the “whale of a deal” was challenging, the hardest part was yet to come. The jet was grounded in Tennessee, unable to fly due to federal regulations. Additionally, Habenicht and his team had to transport the plane from Tennessee to Berrien Springs by the end of December.

Four faculty and four students traveled south with a semi-truck, where they disassembled the jet, packed it on the semi and drove it back to Andrews University—700 man hours, all told.

“It will likely take 1,000–1,500 hours to put it back together,” adds Habenicht.

The plane will provide an educational opportunity in several ways. Students will receive hands-on experience with various systems, including flight control, environmental control, electrical, hydraulic, communication, fuel and navigation systems. Additionally, they will get to work on rebuilding a dismantled aircraft, installing engines and replacing other components.

“The big issue with turbines is starting them,” Habenicht remarks. “You can do severe damage if you don’t start them right. They will literally burn themselves up.”

Despite the emphasis on teaching students how to start the jet’s engines properly, the plane is not capable of flying. First, the runway at the Andrews Airpark is too short for such a large plane, and the jet does not meet noise regulations for flying.

“We’ll put it together, fire it up and taxi it around, but it will never fly again,” says Habenicht.

The 1966 Lear 23 donated by InFlight Medical Services, Inc. in 2012 was given to the department specifically to aid with student training. Verlyn Benson, assistant to the president at that time, coordinated that donation.

“Everyone who helped us retrieve the aircraft treated the Andrews’ team of workers with great respect and helpfulness,” said Benson in 2012. “Many noted that the plane was going to a good home helping students learn more about the profession they all love.”

Habenicht says their relationship with InFlight Medical Services, Inc. has only gotten better over the years.

“They’re a good company with a heart for young aviation professionals,” he says, “and we appreciate their generosity more than we can say.”

For more information about the Department of Aviation, visit andrews.edu/aviation or email airinfo@andrews.edu.

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