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Empty Pockets Never Held Anyone Back

by Josh Rittenberry



The old saying by Norman Vincent Peale that “empty pockets never held anyone back” is finished with “Only empty heads and empty hearts can do that.” Lindsay Chandler has neither an empty head nor an empty heart, but he will be the first to attest that he isn’t a stranger to empty pockets. And for empty pockets, he is grateful.

Growing up in Northeast Arkansas, Lindsay Chandler was immersed in agriculture, his family the proprietors of Chandler & Chandler Farms in Wilson, Arkansas. His interest in aviation arose in high school when he started taking flying lessons which were paid for by his mom Tricia Chandler after she took a second job to cover the cost. Lessons with Mike Schuncke at Osceola Aerial Service began in earnest with Lindsay intending to only get his private certificate. However, as he flew, he also farmed, and then came to the conclusion that, like many farmer-operators, he could utilize his flying skills to treat crops on the family farm.





To get his commercial certificate, Lindsay bought an Ag Cat, but the old yellow bird was relegated to storage on the farm property for two years. But a one day changed everything. Jerry, Jeffrey, and Mark Price of D&F Flying Service encouraged Lindsay to move the Ag Cat to their strip so they could show him the ropes and perhaps put him to work.

After lots of training, Lindsay earned his commercial license and continued to work for D&F Flying Service. He transitioned from the Ag Cat, to a turbine Ag Cat and then an

AT502.

“That’s when it all ramped up,” Lindsay remembers.

In the winter of 2011 a big opportunity presented itself. Lindsay jumped at the chance to buy Pruitt Flying Service, a well-established operation with its own AT502, but that also meant saying goodbye to D&F Flying Service and the individuals who had nurtured his skills.

“I had never had a mentor until Jerry and Jeffrey Price came along. They were the key to my success and I know I wouldn’t be where I am now without them.”

Off on his own, Lindsay was assisted in his new operation by former owner Teddy Pruitt, who agreed to stay on and became another influential mentor as Lindsay found his footing. With one loader and a newly-hired pilot, Lindsay focused on ground work and customer relations early-on, aspects of the flying service business he had never dealt with and needed to learn quickly.

The new operation took off with immediate success, adding two AT802s in addition to the two AT502s already running. Further growth followed in the next few years with the acquisition of Bright Flying Service and an AT602.

“We had a large fleet, but a lot more work. That’s where things started to change.”

At the pinnacle of his professional career to date, when a business owner should be reaping rewards, Lindsay began to experience what it was like to take on too much too soon.

“When I bought a fourth airplane, I was on a down turn and didn’t know it.”

Eying the easiest solution before the bubble burst, Lindsay swapped airplanes so that his operation was a bit more streamlined with three AT802s. But even more dire straits were still to come. In back-to-back seasons, four of his largest customers invested in their own airplanes, wiping out four lucrative contracts from the books and leading Lindsay to question how long he could afford to stay in business.

“I had gotten so big in business that I forgot my humble beginnings, so I panicked and did something an operator should never do: I cut prices. I did the wrong thing out of a necessity to survive. Cutting prices and buying business doesn’t do anything but hurt everybody.”

In bad financial shape, Lindsay knew that he was going to have to get rid of some debt.

“Wade Castleberry wanted to get involved in the industry in some way. So he saved me by injecting money into the business to keep it going.”

With fresh capital and a more manageable fleet, Lindsay was able to return his focus to managing interests on the ground, including repairing vital business relationships. The newest AT802 was then traded for an H80 Turbine Thrush, which was worked for the next three years until Lindsay realized that he needed more power and more speed. With that, he traded the H80 for a 710 Turbine Thrush.

“I fell in love with the Thrush right away, and it continues to fit my operation really well. Each Thrush we operate is stable, safe, and always does really good work.”

Today the operation is thriving with the recent addition of a second 710 Thrush from Mid-Continent, which Lindsay describes as “a no-brainer since the first 710 worked out so well.” Lindsay shares flying duties with Steve Bright and Jerry Teague and is in the early stages of training a promising ag pilot, Thomas Green. In addition, lead ground crewman Brad Duty and secretary Donna Alvarado provide critical support. Lindsay’s wife, Michelle, is also a big part of what keeps the business going as she oversees much of the complicated bookwork. When they are not in business mode, Lindsay and Michelle are doting parents to 9-year-old Hazel and 5-year-old Birdie.



“I have worked with some of the best pilots in the industry: Mike Schuncke, Jerry and Jeffrey Price, Steve Bright, Jerry Teague...but by far the best thing that has ever happened to me was going broke. When I got that first taste of success I was too big for my britches and became reckless in my professional and personal life. Being broke forced me to face the downside of success. Thankfully, I’ve had time to correct it.”

The result of being broke, more often than not, is having empty pockets. In a time before Lindsay could imagine all of the ups and downs of his career, he needed help purchasing his first ag business, so he looked to his reliable dad, the late Gary Chandler for help. Mr. Chandler invested as a silent partner until 2019. When Lindsay sat in a lawyer’s office to setup the legalities of the new business including a name, he pondered a moment then spouted out the first thing that came to his comical mind: Empty Pockets. And then he left. No one ever called the lawyer back to change the business to a more serious name and, thus, Empty Pockets Flying Service was born.

The business name that Lindsay intended to be a joke turned out to be the saving grace that has never held him back.

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In Memoriam

Sharon Kay Watkins was born on December 10, 1954 at Pemiscot Memorial Hospital in Hayti, MO to P.A. Watkins, Jr. and Joy Womble Watkins. She passed away from this life peacefully at her home in Hayti on November 20, 2023.

Sharon and her two younger brothers, Michael and Roger, grew up in the family's idyllic farm in a rural area outside of Wardell, MO.

After graduating from Caruthersville High School in 1972, Sharon attended Arkansas State University, before transitioning to her career as an insurance broker at Mid-Continent Aircraft Corporation in 1981. She hit the ground running, earning her agent's license, then broker's license, all the while representing Mid-Continent at various state and national association conventions, and even abroad in the United Kingdom. Taking the reins of the Insurance Division in 1992 and later becoming a corporate officer, Sharon's reputation for devotion to her customers and her job remains well-respected throughout the aviation industry to this day.



Whether guiding a fledgling operation through its growing pains, delivering welcomed news of a really good quote, or calming an anxious insured with a worrisome claim, it was Sharon's instinct to go above and beyond; to make extraordinary tasks seem ordinary. For this and more, it is no wonder why she was named one of Pemiscot County's Outstanding Women in Business.

As a reliable colleague, mentor, and friend to those who worked with her, Sharon was a chief encourager who nurtured ambitions and championed accomplishments of others. It is that legacy of selflessness that continues to inspire her former co-workers.

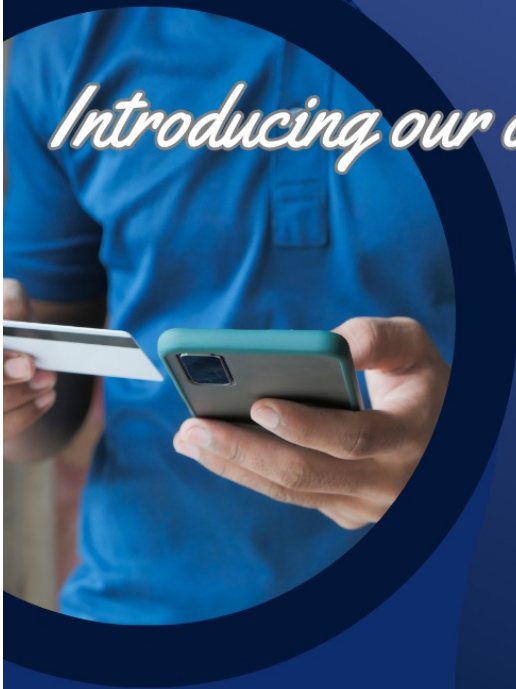
Finally enjoying the fruits of her labors, Sharon entered into retirement in 2022. She spent time decorating and refinishing her home, collecting antiques, and spending time with friends.

Sharon embraced her faith as a member of the Temple Baptist Church in Caruthersville beginning in the late 1960s and then more recently as a member of the Hayti First Baptist Church.

Sharon was preceded in death by her parents and brother Michael. Those left to celebrate her memory include brother and sister-in-law Roger and Donna Watkins, aunt and uncle Lee and Geraldine Watkins, aunt and uncle Dan and Brenda Westbrook, aunt and uncle Norris and Delores Watkins, aunt Patsy Sadler, a host of cousins and nieces and nephews, including Sarah Watkins, best friend Genia Taylor, The Turnage Family, and the entire Mid-Continent family.

Funeral services were held November 22, 2023 at the Hayti First Baptist Church with Brother Mark Hoover officiating. Burial was at Woodlawn Cemetery in Hayti. Pallbearers included Chris Cobb, Kevin Curtis, James Forbus, Stan Hunter, Josh Rittenberry, and Tyler Watkins.

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Mid-Continent Aircraft Corp. is located in Hayti, Missouri, 80 miles north of Memphis, Tennessee. Although Hayti is not the geographical center of our nation, Mid-Continent is the center for all ag aviation needs. With excellent daily truck freight lines, air freight, Federal Express, and UPS delivery capability, MID-CONTINENT has and will continue to cover the world.

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