

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

» Getting to Know COPA Pilots



Jim and his son Oliver at AirVenture taking a break under the wing of his 2006 SR22 G2.



LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now own a Cirrus SR22. With John as the pilot-in-command and Laurie as the partner, they regularly travel to see family, visit friends and enjoy our beautiful country. You can read more of Laurie's work on her website: www.laurieeinsteinkoszuta.com.

When He is Not Handling Emergencies, James Custis is Flying High

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

Years before James Custis went to medical school or became a pilot, he traveled the world for a year dancing and singing in the cast of the show "Up with People." That was 1989, and it was something he auditioned for and could do after high school. No one in his family had ever gone to college, so when that gig ended, Jim (the nickname he prefers) worked as a dance instructor in Sarasota, Florida. After his boss had a sudden heart attack in front of him, the trajectory of his life changed. Fortunately, his boss survived, most likely due to Jim's quick thinking and



Jim recently volunteered to be COPA's Regional Governor for the U.S. south-east region tasked to set up a social gathering for members in that region.

that of the others who performed CPR until the paramedics arrived. Because of that experience, Jim enrolled in a community college the next day, earning an associate degree.

Even though Jim's fascination for flying was strong, his free time was limited as he continued his studies at New College of Florida and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Neuroscience. At the time, Jim used his scuba and skydiving hobbies to simulate what it might feel like to fly and be a pilot. Under the water, on the occasional dive trips, he could dream

about flying as he floated on top of the reefs and looked down. Skydiving was equally entrancing as it allowed him to feel the rush of the air on his face. College led to medical school at the University of South Florida in Tampa, and again, his aspiration to learn to fly had to be put on hold. Between medical school, completing his residency and starting a full-time job as a physician, it took nearly 10 years before he began considering flying lessons.

"I became tired of reading all the medical journals," said Jim, now an emergency

department physician at Ascension St. Vincent's St. Clair Hospital in Pell City, Alabama, "and wanted a challenge. I went to the Birmingham Flight Center (KBHM) and took a discovery flight. It was my birthday in March 2009, and eight days later, I started taking lessons."

At the flight school, Jim initially trained on a Cessna Skyhawk 172 and later switched to a Piper Cherokee. Once he completed the lessons and ground school, he took his check ride in April 2010 and had amassed about 60 hours of flight time by then.



« **Jim ready to take to the skies** in the Cirrus with his sons JW (left) and Oliver (right).

“Being a member of COPA is the best money I’ve spent because it has helped me avoid unnecessary expenses.”

As a relatively new pilot, Jim, who was single then, wanted to take his date, Krissy, up for a ride. Krissy, who later became his wife, was a nurse who worked for an air ambulance service and was used to flying with patients in helicopters. When she returned to work after the date, she asked the helicopter pilots why the plane had flown so high because that had made her very nervous. The pilots laughingly explained that general aviation planes fly thousands of feet in the air while helicopters fly around 800 feet.

“The helicopter pilots used to joke that they had more time in the traffic pattern than I had total time,” Jim said with a laugh. “It is something that Krissy still reminds me of to this day.”

Shortly after meeting Krissy, Jim bought into a partnership with four others to purchase a Cessna Cardinal. Over time,

one of the partners left and sold his share to Jim. Bruce, one of the remaining partners, became close to the family and the kids began calling him “Pawpaw.” As more time passed, the two other partners used the plane less and less and ultimately sold their shares to Bruce and Jim. The two eventually sold that plane in April 2016.

“We were without a plane at that point,” Jim said. “My wife and I drove down to the beach for spring break the next month with two kids in the car: Ethan, who was 16 then, and Oliver, a baby. The drive should have taken four hours, but it took eight excruciatingly painful hours. At that point, I was ‘ordered’ to find and buy a new plane. I spent spring break looking at plane ads, and my flying partner and I had paperwork filled out before the end of the week for a Cherokee Six.”

“I was a very proficient VFR pilot,” Jim said. “We flew to many places, including Niagara Falls, New York; Key West, Florida; Savannah, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; and several times to AirVenture at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, but I wanted to get my instrument rating. I waited a long time to do that, and I passed in March 2017. By then, I had well over 400 hours of flight time. We had the Cherokee until February 2020 and because of COVID, we ended up selling it.”

In the past, Jim, his wife and sons, which now included JW, had attended the EAA AirVenture and always seemed to find their way to the Cirrus tent.

“The Cirrus salespeople always encouraged me and the kids to sit in the airplane,” he said, “but I tried to avoid it since I knew those planes were expensive. Yet, when I did, something about

sitting there made me realize it was the airplane I wanted to own. It is the best plane on the market because it is comfortable, spacious, has a significant payload, air conditioning and modern avionics.”

As COVID was winding down at the end of summer in 2021, Jim still longed to own an airplane.

“I did a lot of research,” he said, “and decided that an SR22 G2 would be right for us.”

When the time seemed right for Jim to make a purchase, the market was highly competitive, and any Cirrus listed for sale was sold within hours.

“Every morning, I would check online to see if any new listings met my criteria, but it was always the same. I would call the brokers, and they would say that they already had five offers and were under contract. I finally found a listing for a 2006 G2 I wanted and immediately called, but it was already under contract. By Monday morning, the original deal with the other buyer had fallen through, and N287DS was mine if I wanted it.”

Because the Cirrus was based in Ft. Myers, Florida, Jim had to make a long-distance purchase from Alabama, but Savvy Aviation looked at the books for the Cirrus and helped to arrange the prebuy inspection.

When it was time to pick up the airplane, Jim and two friends had to fly to Punta Gorda, a city about 25 miles north of Ft. Myers. “One of the guys is a flight instructor, which was very helpful because I had not flown a Cirrus before. The avionics were completely different. I hand-flew it back, which was a great experience.”

Jim noted what a positive experience being a COPA member has been. “I can get on the forums and seek advice from experienced Cirrus owners,” he said. “Being a member of COPA is the best money I’ve spent because it has helped me avoid unnecessary expenses. It is a community of people and resources that help address and troubleshoot issues and make informed decisions.”

Going forward, Jim has taken on the voluntary role of Regional Governor (RG) for COPA’s southeast region, which came about after the Kansas City Migration. The RGs are tasked with setting up a regional social meeting at an airport of interest and have plans to expand to three or four more each year. Additionally, the RGs sit on the COPA Advisory Board.

“I have over 1,000 flight hours and have taken other courses,” Jim said, “but I want to attend one or more CPPP events this year. My work schedule had prevented me from going previously, but it is important and will be so worthwhile, just like everything else that I have found with COPA.” ☺



⋈ **Krissy with Oliver and JW** in the Cherokee Six Jim co-owned before he bought his Cirrus.

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