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» Getting to Know
COPA Pilots



LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now owns 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.

Brandon Robinson (right) with business partner/"family member" Jeff Babineaux in front of one of their Cirrus aircraft.



From Construction
Sites to Cockpits:
How Two Entrepreneurs Transformed
Their Business Using Cirrus Aircraft

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

Brandon Robinson and his business partner Jeff Babineaux never planned to become pilots. In fact, both openly admit to a long-standing aversion to small planes. "I've read so many stories about people with a lifelong passion for flying," said Brandon. "They'd describe how they knew they wanted to be pilots from a young age. That was never me. I grew up knowing I never wanted my feet to leave the ground."

Jeff agreed. "As a commercial general contractor, I was perfectly content traveling in my F250 truck. It got the job done."

Brandon was a certified registered nurse anesthetist (CRNA) at the time and said divine intervention changed his life in ways he never imagined. Curiosity led him to stop at a construction site one evening while driving home. He saw purple and yellow colors that were visible to drivers passing by.

"I assumed someone from Louisiana State University (LSU) was building a gym in Lafayette, where I live," he recalled, "so I had to stop. When I did, a guy came out of the on-site construction trailer and waved me down. We started chatting, and I asked if the building had anything to do with LSU. He said no and that it was a build for Planet Fitness."

As the conversation continued, the man, who said he was from Canada and was from the corporate office, obtained Brandon's contact information. Over the next two months, the

man persistently pushed the idea of Brandon owning a Planet Fitness location. "I told him if you ever wanted to stymie an entrepreneur allow them to become professionals," Brandon said. "I needed a Planet Fitness like a hole in my head." Yet, despite his resistance, the man was incredibly determined to bring Brandon on board as a franchisee. Three months later, Brandon reconsidered and purchased Lake Charles, Louisiana, as his first Planet Fitness territory to develop.

Building the First Gym
and the Birth of a
Partnership

"At the time, I was traveling around the state of Louisiana speaking to high school students about the danger of alcohol and drug use. I asked a local pastor to accompany me on these talks," said Brandon. "When it came time to build the gym, the pastor highly recommended Jeff Babineaux, who lived about 15 minutes from Lake Charles in Sulphur, Louisiana, citing his two decades of experience and integrity in the commercial general contractor field."

The two met for the first time in the back of the church after a Sunday service. It was then that Brandon made a straightforward offer to Jeff. "I told him I didn't want a bid; I wanted him to build my Planet Fitness location and I had \$777,000 to make it happen." Jeff agreed he could make it work and the partnership was



Besides using the SR20 for travel needs of the company, it is used for flight training any employees or family members who wish to become pilots.

born. They began working together at the end of 2011 and by early 2012, the construction of their first gym had begun. Since then, the two have become more than business partners. “Jeff is the brother I never had,” said Brandon. “We have never had a cross word; my family is his family and vice versa.”

Balancing Two Careers: From CRNA to Franchisee

Over the next six years, Brandon balanced his CRNA career with building Planet Fitness locations nationwide. As their business grew, Jeff suggested that flying to job sites might be a more practical way to save time on travel. “I was completely against it,” noted Brandon. “Small planes were the ones that crashed and I wasn’t interested. My wife was a hard ‘no’ on the idea also.”

A Life-Changing Discovery Flight

However, a frustrating drive to Monroe, Louisiana, for a construction job changed Brandon’s perspective. Typically, the trip from Lafayette took three hours by car, but after being stopped three times for minor speed infractions, it stretched

to four. “I kept thinking, ‘This is crazy,’ and I became more open to flying,” he said. Jeff found a Cirrus and insisted they take a look, and both took a discovery flight. “When we took our first flight to Monroe, the trip took just 51 minutes. That’s when I realized the plane wasn’t just transportation; it was a time machine.”

Taking the Leap: Leasing a Cirrus Aircraft

In 2016, they found a local company that offered dry leasing of Cirrus airplanes. “We began leasing a Cirrus for \$250 an hour, plus \$60 to \$70 for a pilot and the fuel,” explained Brandon. “We were content with the arrangement even though it wasn’t cheap. The time saved was worth every penny. With every flight, we got more comfortable with the aircraft. Eventually, we became enamored with the safety features and reliability to the point that I’ve always said I won’t fly in anything that doesn’t say Cirrus on it.” Jason Madden, a flight instructor they met, is probably the sole reason that Jeff and Brandon have a plane. “He told us that we needed to buy an airplane and were missing out on not having one,” said Brandon.

Buying Their Own Aircraft

By 2018, Brandon had retired from medicine and he and Jeff decided Jason was right. Despite tremendous hesitation about the cost, they purchased their own Cirrus aircraft. “I had to be convinced this was a good investment rather than just continuing with dry leasing,” said Brandon. Despite owning their own Cirrus, both men still hesitated to become pilots. It was a year later before they finally decided that it was probably essential. “I told Jeff I’d learn to fly just in case I needed to take over the controls someday,” Brandon recalled, “but I never planned on soloing. Yet somehow, God has a way of desensitizing your fears and equipping you to move forward. It’s no different from any other challenge we’ve faced together.” When the duo bought their Cirrus, the insurance broker asked them to estimate the number of hours they anticipated flying in a month. Neither had any idea, so they followed the broker’s typical suggestion of 20 hours a month. “When the broker checked in with us five months into our ownership,” Brandon chuckled, “they were shocked to learn that we had flown 600 hours in just that amount of time.”

Brandon and Jeff earned their private pilot certificates after a year of lessons with Glenn Carter, a longtime flight instructor and seasoned airframe and powerplant (A&P) mechanic. Given the nature of their business, they immediately pursued instrument training, recognizing the importance of flying in various weather conditions. “We knew that we would have to be proficient in instrument conditions for cross-country flying,” said Brandon. Jeff’s past skills and experience in maritime navigation and operating heavy equipment have translated well to flying. “You’re used to the rudder control with your feet, and you’re used to the navigational aids,” he noted.

The Competitive Advantage of Flying

Flying became integral to their business strategy, enabling the partners to efficiently manage and grow their brand exponentially in ways they never envisioned. “The Cirrus gave us a competitive advantage and made us more efficient. We could be face-to-face with anyone we worked with, no matter the distance,” said Brandon, “and we could do it in less time, do a good job and be home at night.”



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By 2019, they had built 180 Planet Fitness locations across 17 states, making them the largest fitness franchisee in the nation.

In December 2019, just 10 days before this country heard about COVID, Brandon and Jeff decided to sell all their locations. Brandon said it was another divine intervention of his Planet Fitness tenure.

The Cirrus Fleet

“I tell people that the Cirrus is my work truck. I fly the plane more than I drive my truck to work,” Brandon said. Jeff added, “Because we are now licensed in 44 states, the plane is more than just a convenience; it’s essential.”

Jeff and Brandon use their aircraft at least two or three times a week, just like others use their cars. “After we bought one Cirrus, we realized we needed another one so we could split up and cover more ground. It’s made life easier and more efficient. Now, we have a fleet of four Cirrus aircraft. They’re all on the move for our business; many times, all four are in the air at once. We fly them and also have Glenn Carter fly our vice president of construction or project managers where they need to go. We can make an impression in our business that is uniquely different from the competition of those around us.”

Their business, Planet Construction J2911, LLC, owns four Cirrus aircraft, including a new 2024 SR22 G7, a 2016 SR22 G5 and a 2008 SR22TN G3. Both of the latter were customized, including custom paint and interiors from Steel Aviation in Phillipsburg, Ohio, in 2022. They also acquired a 2016 SR20 to train employees and family members interested in becoming pilots, although that plane is also in constant use. The aircraft are meticulously maintained by



Cirrus in McKinney, Texas (TKI) and are always kept in a hangar when traveling. “If we’re quick and will be in and out at a location,” Brandon said, “then we just put on the sun shades. Otherwise, those planes sleep in a hangar every night, never outside.”

A New Way of Doing Business

“Having the Cirrus doesn’t just serve our business needs; it also has allowed us to go on vacation and arrive and leave when we want,” Brandon offered. “To me, the Cirrus has the algorithm for safety and beauty. I tell everybody, there’s Toyota, Mercedes, Ferrari and Bugatti. Cirrus is the Bugatti of the piston-driven aircraft

in its class. Everything about it is first class.”

Even though they fly hundreds of hours a year for their jobs, some years combining for 1,000 hours of use, Brandon and Jeff prioritize safety above all and agree they don’t have ‘get-there-itis.’ “If it’s not safe to fly, we don’t go,” Jeff said. “We respect the weather and don’t put ourselves in any situation we shouldn’t be in. We generally try to stay in VFR days. As pilots, we also share the workload during trips. Brandon might fly the first leg of a trip, and I will fly the second. We alternate to stay fresh and prevent fatigue.”

Despite their busy schedules, Brandon and Jeff make time for regular training

twice a year at Cirrus in McKinney. “We plan to attend some COPA events in the future, and we want our spouses to take the partner-in-command course,” Brandon noted.

A Shared Passion

“We named our construction company Planet Construction J2911 because Planet Fitness had such a profound impact on our lives,” Brandon explained. “The J2911 is a reference to Jeremiah 29:11 in the Bible.

We build for many national brands across the country, including Planet Fitness, Urban Air, Burlington Coat Factory, Club 4 Fitness, Five Below, Equipment Share and K9 Doggy Daycare, just to name



a few. We’ve even had the pleasure of building out a gym in the Louisiana Governor’s Mansion for Governor Jeff Landry and staff.”

With four Cirrus in their fleet, flying has become a shared passion for people they know and care about. According to Brandon, there are now 10 pilots or

student pilots between them and their family members.

“For two guys who were averse to flying, becoming owners of one of the country’s largest fleets of Cirrus aircraft kind of snuck up on us,” said Brandon. “I couldn’t fathom where we would be without them.” ☺

« The company’s SR22 G5 and SR22TN G3 have custom paint and interior done by Steel Aviation.

