

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

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COPA Pilots



» Nikki and Rob

Rob Fulton Rises to the Challenge as the Next COPA President

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta



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.

Long before Rob Fulton became a pilot and decades before he agreed to lead COPA as its next president, he was a farm boy mowing grass and looking skyward as airplanes descended over wheat fields and cow pastures south of Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I loved watching those planes on the approach path to Charlotte Douglas International Airport (KCLT)," Rob recalled, "but I only had the chance to fly a couple of times as a kid."

After finishing school and beginning his career at Microsoft, Rob traveled frequently to Seattle for business. Although he had been fascinated by aviation as a child, he became increasingly uncomfortable as an adult when traveling by air.

"The turbulence on those commercial flights really started bothering me," he said. "It got to the point where I didn't think I could travel and do my job. It was just short of petrifying. I guess I was under the impression every flight was supposed



Rob's 2015 Cirrus SR20 G3.

to be smooth and when it wasn't, I began imagining the whole airplane falling out of the sky."

Rob eventually confided in a friend, who happened to be a pilot, about his growing fear. His friend suggested he take a discovery flight, believing that understanding how airplanes work would make flying less frightening.

"I have a learn-it-all kind of attitude," Rob said. "I was in my mid-20s at the time and thought a discovery flight sounded like a good idea."

He made the arrangements at FlyCarolina flight school in Monroe, North Carolina, and took the flight in a Cessna 172.

"I absolutely loved the experience," he said. "I love technology and once I began to understand what was happening, it all made sense and the earlier feelings I had disappeared. It made me feel like I was in control of my own destiny."

Learning To Fly

The experience was so fulfilling that Rob immediately signed up for flight lessons. Within six months, he had earned his private pilot certificate and was ready to buy his own plane.

He purchased a Beechcraft Sundowner and earned his instrument rating in it six months later.

"I was the first person in the area to install a Garmin 430," he said. "As soon as it became available, I wanted it because I have always been interested in the latest technology."

After about three years, family and career responsibilities began demanding more of his time and he decided to sell the Sundowner.

"I realized it would be difficult to maintain proficiency if I wasn't flying regularly," he said. "I ended up stepping away from aviation for nearly a decade, but the desire to fly never completely disappeared."

Finding His Way Back

During his first extended absence from flying, around 2001, the same pilot who had suggested the discovery flight invited Rob to fly in an early Cirrus SR20.

"I wanted to decline the invitation because I knew it would make me miss flying even more," Rob said. "But my friend really wanted me to go up and I eventually gave in. It was an

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amazing aircraft and different from anything I'd ever flown. Unfortunately, the price point seemed far beyond my reach, so I put aside any thoughts of flying or owning a Cirrus."

In 2013, when his kids were older and he had more free time, Rob returned to flying. To rebuild proficiency and confidence, he completed refresher training in a rented retractable-gear Cessna 172RG and later flew a Cessna 182.

"It felt good to be back in the cockpit and flying," he said. "I flew for a few more years and then life got in the way again and I had to put aviation on hold."

By late 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the urge to return to aviation had become impossible to ignore. At that point, Rob thought he might be able to afford a Cirrus of his own.

"Honestly, I thought the only way I would be able to own a Cirrus was if it was really old and had an engine that was about to fall off," he said.

In May 2020, Rob had several conversations with a broker who assured him Cirrus ownership might be possible. The broker knew of a seller in Florida who was offering a well-maintained 2015 SR20 G3.

More Than an Airplane

"The only reason I could even consider buying that plane was because of something my wife, Nikki, said," Rob explained. "She told me, 'If you are going to buy a plane, it better have a parachute and the second thing is it has to have air conditioning.'"

Rob traveled to Florida and after all the pre-buy inspections were completed, he finalized the deal in early June 2021. "I haven't looked back since," he said. Once Rob decided to purchase a Cirrus, he immediately joined COPA in search of community and a place to learn.



Rob picking up his 2015 Cirrus SR20 G3.



Rob and his instructor flying home after taking delivery of N212PF.

Rob began Cirrus Embark through Aerowood Aviation, a Cirrus Training Center (CTC) and Cirrus Authorized Service Center (CSC) at Charlotte-Monroe Executive Airport (KEQY). He logged about five hours in a rental SR20 before traveling to pick up his airplane. An instructor accompanied him on the flight home and Rob continued his transition training in his own aircraft.

The plane's value became especially meaningful when Rob's mother became ill with COVID. "When my mother was sick, it was a horrible situation," he said, "but I was able to travel back and forth and see her in a way that I never would have been able to without my Cirrus." After her death, the airplane continued to help Rob remain close to his father. "I could fly down for one night or for the weekend and check on Dad," he said. "It made sense."

Although Rob may consider upgrading someday, he is totally committed to the plane he owns. "I put blood, sweat and tears into getting that plane where it is today," he said. "I've replaced the engine and completed one of the first Perspective-to-Perspective+ upgrades."

Rob's professional life has continued to center on technology. After retiring from Microsoft, he worked for ServiceNow and currently leads North American technical pre-sales for Appian, a software company headquartered in the Washington, D.C., area.

A Chance Meeting Leads to Leadership

Rob credits, or jokingly blames, Ed Watters for encouraging him to accept many of the positions he has held within COPA.

"I met Ed by chance at Blue Ridge Regional Airport in Martinsville, Virginia (KMTV), when he was on a training mission," Rob said. "Two weeks after I met him, he called and told



⏮ **Sunset beauty shot** of N212PF.

me I would make a great COPA regional governor, a volunteer role that included regional representation and event support. We no longer have that position, but I did help with some behind-the-scenes work.”

Within the next year, Ed approached him again. “He said, ‘I think you need to be on the board,’” Rob recalled. There wasn’t an immediate opening, but Rob agreed and joined the board when a position became available. The pattern continued as Ed later encouraged Rob to become vice president and eventually serve as president.

“He told me that I would be good at it and could build on the work that current president, TJ Shembekar, had started,” Rob said with a laugh. “I told him he was killing me, but I don’t think he was listening.”

As COPA’s incoming president, Rob is focused on the association’s long-term direction.

“One of my biggest concerns is what happens to COPA within the next five or 10 years,” he said. “We have typically been very reactionary, which means we do things based on what we are currently seeing. We are doing a fantastic job as an organization of building better, safer pilots through community.”

The future of the organization is a subject that Rob says he has been discussing with the board for several years. He has asked the board to support the development of a long-term plan as he transitions into the presidency.

“All of us want to move the needle on things that matter to our members,” he noted. “One of those goals includes growing the membership to 10,000 within the next five years. We will

share the full plan at the COPA Migration in San Antonio in September.”

According to Rob, the demographics and expectations of Cirrus owners are changing. He sees younger pilots joining COPA and longtime members possibly seeking different forms of support than pilots needed when the association was formed.

In COPA’s early years, CTCs and CSCs were not as widely available. Much of the organization’s value came from helping members solve technical, maintenance or engine-related issues.

COPA’s forums contain decades of technical knowledge from pilots and respected maintenance experts. That is information Rob considers to be one of the association’s greatest assets and an important source of assistance to members looking for particular answers.

Rob believes the forums remain necessary, although it is increasingly a secondary benefit rather than the primary reason many people join. He wants COPA to create more value through events, shared experiences and memorable destinations.

He also recognizes that some members hesitate to participate in online discussions, making it important to find and provide welcoming and accessible ways to reach COPA’s accumulated knowledge.

COPA.fyi is one such tool because it helps organize that material and makes it easier to access. “However, we still need that backend knowledge,” he said.

Meant To Be Shared

Rob points out that the Cirrus life has become increasingly appealing to members. “I want to make sure part of that vision includes expanding COPA’s events and creating more opportunities for members to gather at memorable destinations.”

He said the organization will “have to think differently over the next five years,” and that’s what he’s committed to doing.

That philosophy informs the question he believes anyone seeking a leadership position should be prepared to answer: Why do you want to serve this organization?

For Rob, the answer is straightforward. “I believe our experiences are meant to be shared with others. That is how we connect with each other. COPA has already given me more than I could ever repay.” ➕



➤ Rob and Nikki flying with their dog Phoebe, a regular passenger.

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