

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

» 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.



Side-by-Side: Chris and Angella Keel's Journey to the Left Seat

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

The air was smooth and a gray blanket of stratus clouds stretched across the sky as pilot Chris Keel ascended in his Diamond DA40. Sitting beside him was his wife, Angella, and buckled in the back seat were their two daughters, Charlotte and Audrey Piper.



⏏ **Chris and Angella** enjoy a flight together.

⏏ **The Keel family** – Chris, Angella, Charlotte and Audrey Piper – after a fun day at Disneyland.

Mid-climb, Angella suddenly stiffened, sat bolt upright and turned to Chris. “What would happen if something happened to you while we are flying?” Without hesitation, Chris responded calmly, asking, “What button would you push?” Angella reached forward and pointed to a button on the stick. Chris shook his head, smiled and said, “You would have just disconnected the autopilot.”

Chris had no idea that Angella was so frightened or that she had been crying behind her sunglasses during that flight. But for Angella, that moment marked a turning point. Until then, she had been perfectly content flying as a passenger. She totally trusted Chris and his skills, but the experience made

her realize something deeper. “I had a real sense of helplessness and fear of the unknown,” Angella said. “I didn’t want to continue flying with that feeling.”

Chris offered a simple suggestion: she could learn how to land the plane. It was a comment that opened the door to a bigger discussion and Angella’s eventual path to the left seat.

A Pilot’s Roots

Chris’ own aviation journey started long before that flight. At 16, he had his sights set on either becoming a Navy fighter pilot or possibly a surgeon. “But then I got glasses,” he said, “and that pretty much ended the dream of flying for the Navy.”



⌘ *The Keel's 2022 Cirrus SR22T in the hangar at KCQF.*

Although it was a setback, Chris' father, who was not a pilot at the time, encouraged Chris to follow his dream and learn to fly.

"I got my license when I was 18," he said, "and not long after, my father decided he liked the idea of flying and bought a Cessna 182 on a leaseback program. He's a big guy. He needed a plane that size for flight training. Eighteen months later, he earned his private certificate."

Flying the 182 became a regular part of their lives. Even during college, Chris always found time to fly. "After I graduated from college," he said, "my father sold the plane and I headed to medical school."

Despite the demands of medical school, Chris couldn't let go of flying and managed to stay current. "Against everyone's advice," he said sheepishly, "I used some of my student loan money to keep flying. I just loved it so much."

By the time he began his urology residency at Tulane University, the demands of his training left little room for much else and aviation took a back seat. While there, he met Angella, who was working as a nurse. After completing his training, the couple married and moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where Chris began practicing.

After a family tragedy, Chris and his family relocated from Chattanooga to Fairhope, Alabama, where he joined a local practice to be closer to loved ones. At that point, Chris didn't have much time to fly and it had faded from his life for nearly seven years.

Back to the Sky

By 2017, Chris eased back into flying by joining a local flying club at H.L. Sonny Callahan Airport (KCQF), sharing a 1968 Cessna 172 with eight other pilots. With no hangar space available at the time, it was a practical way to get back in the air.

Later, he sold his share of the 172, built a hangar and partnered with another member in a Diamond DA40. "With two young daughters, it was the perfect airplane for family trips," Chris noted. "I learned a lot about ownership, including maintenance, inspections and how everything actually works. You don't learn that as a student pilot."

Searching for the Right Airplane

After a couple of years, he began thinking about owning a more advanced aircraft. That decision didn't happen overnight.

"We were introduced to Cirrus by Larry Anderson, who is a Cirrus Standardized Instructor Pilot (CSIP) and a friend," Chris said. "He knew we were looking for another airplane and offered to take us up. At the time, I was really interested in a Piper Saratoga; I liked the comfort of it. We even went to look at one together.

But Larry kept saying, 'You need to look at a Cirrus before you buy anything.' We looked at a Saratoga, then a Bonanza, but once Angella flew in the Cirrus, that really changed things."

He laughed and said, "The parachute sells it. It sells it every time."

"I was planning on putting my kids in it a lot," Chris added, "so I wanted to get a newer Cirrus SR22T G6 with modern technology and one without a lot of time on it."

But Angella wasn't immediately on board.

"Once we had our kids with us frequently, I became more fearful," she said. "I kept thinking about the fact that if something happened, I wouldn't know what to do."

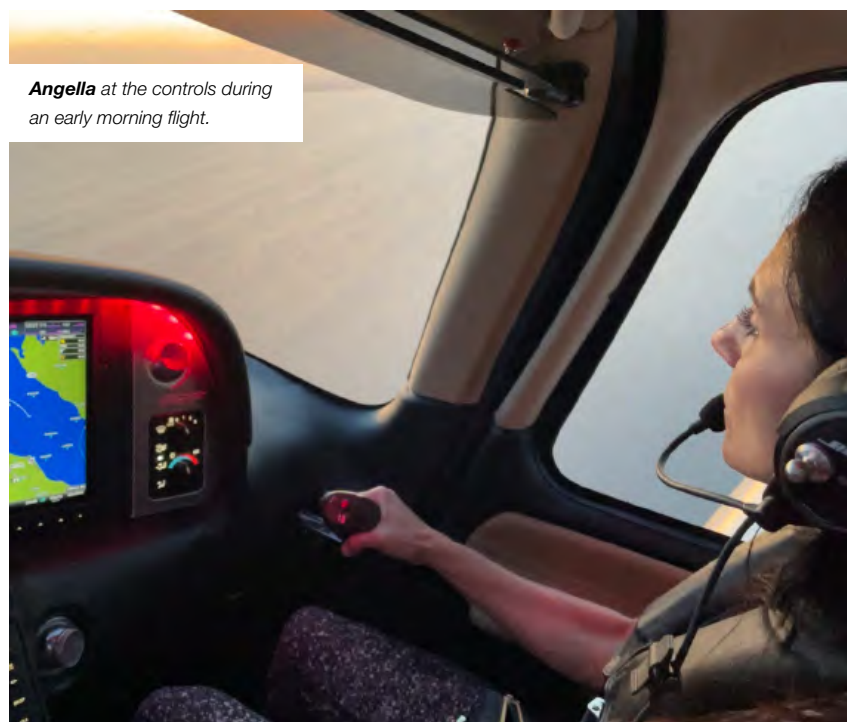
The Flight That Sparked a Change

During that time, something unexpected happened.

"When Chris ordered the new Cirrus in 2022, the salesman said delivery would take two years," Angella said. "That gave me the chance to take a discovery flight on my own."

The pilot of that flight was Ivy McIver, executive director of the Cirrus SR Product Line. During the flight, she handed Angella the controls.

"That was a big moment for me," Angella said. "It was inspiring to see a woman as the pilot. We connected right away. I thought, at the very least, I want to be able to land the plane and not be so fearful."



Angella at the controls during an early morning flight.

Short-N-Numbers.com

Aircraft Registration Numbers with 3-Digits or Less

4 Numbers + 3 Letters	3 Numbers + 1 Letter	2 Numbers + 2 Letters
2R	10D	5BR
4J	10P	5BZ
4K	11P	5BF
4V	11Q	5BG
4Z	11T	5BI
5C	11Z	5BK
5T	12C	5BL
5V	12E	5BN
6C	12H	5BU
6E	12L	5BV
6H	12U	5BX
6N	13F	600
6S	13B	605
7C	13Q	60M
7L	13R	60N
7Q	13S	60U
7T	13U	60V
7V	13V	61B
7W	13V	61C
7Z	14D	61D
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« Angella with instructor Larry Anderson.

“The parachute sold me,” she said. “At that point, I thought if something happens, I can just pull the chute.” Once Angella had that sense of reassurance, she got the confidence to take the next step.

“When I realized I could land the plane,” she said, “I started thinking that I should just finish flight training and get my license.”

A Medical Roadblock

But getting to that point wasn’t a straight path. Even though Angella met the requirements and passed the neurocognitive exam, the FAA denied her medical certification due to her history of multiple sclerosis.

“It was incredibly frustrating,” Chris said. “It was a 21-month ordeal. Angella was diagnosed with MS at age 20. Even recently placing in the top third of the Chicago Marathon didn’t matter to the FAA; they based their decision on her treatment rather than how she was functioning.”

At the time, Chris was training to become an aviation medical examiner (AME). While in Oklahoma City, he had a chance encounter with a deputy federal air surgeon and told him about Angella’s situation. The conversation proved to be pivotal. Six months later, the FAA reversed its decision and Angella received her medical clearance and resumed training.

Going Forward

“I didn’t want to learn enough just to get by,” Angella said. “I wanted to solo and do it myself.”

She started in a Cessna 152, transitioned to a 172 and steadily built confidence under the guidance of Larry.

“He knew how afraid I was,” Angella said. “He was incredibly calm and patient. I soloed, and six months later, by June 2024, I earned my private pilot certificate.”

Today, Angella is an active participant in the cockpit. She helps handle radios, monitor systems and steps in when needed.

“I like that I have some control over what is happening,” she said, “and that I can be helpful as Chris’ copilot, which is better for our children and our safety.”

On one flight, navigating around building thunderstorms, Chris felt the pressure.

“She picked up on it immediately,” he said. “She jumped on the radio and handled that so I could just fly the airplane.”

“We fly about 150 to 200 hours a year,” Chris said. “We have gone on quick trips and full-scale adventures. We’ve been to Sedona, Arizona; Disneyland in Anaheim, California; the California coast; and to Cincinnati, Ohio, to see the Ark Encounter, to name a few of our favorites.”

Chris said: “I’m so proud of Angella and all that she’s accomplished. I think her story is just so amazing.”

Even their daughters have an opinion.

“I act like it’s not a big deal that we have a plane and both my parents are pilots,” said 10-year-old Charlotte, “but it’s actually really cool.” Audrey Piper, 8, sees it a little differently. She has grown up flying in the family plane and she has never even been on a commercial flight.

“I love that Angella and I can show our daughters that nothing can stop you if you have perseverance,” Chris said. “She’s a great SR22T copilot and is considering an instrument rating. That’s a big deal.” ☺