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A family that flies together

David Eby turns love of airplanes into business career.

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WAKARUSA -- This story is about a family whose plans "are all up in the air."

Well, mostly.

Four of five family members are pilots and the fifth has taken lessons.

In addition, their only son-in-law -- you guessed it -- is a pilot.

It started years ago with a father's goal.

"I loved the idea of flying and wanted to be an Air Force pilot," said David Eby, "but fell short of vision requirements."

So he found another way to be in the air. Thirty years ago, David Eby purchased a Cessna 188 (called an Ag Pickup) to spray crops for neighboring farmers.

Today, AgriFlite Services Inc. owns and uses five planes in its aerial applications business.

David, along with his two grown sons Ryan and Garrett, applies fungicides, insecticides and fertilizers to farmlands in a 150-mile radius stretching from the hub of their New Road farm.

Also, they spread seeds for wheat, rye and grass.

This makes for a busy summer season, says David. "Especially ones when we struggle against wind, rain or fog."

It helps, he said, that they have their own weather program to measure conditions.

According to Ryan, who returned a year ago from a Wisconsin management job to AgriFlite's growing business, many organizational challenges exist in this business.

"Like making sure the exact areas to be serviced, the right chemicals are loaded and the jobs get executed within 12 hours," he said.



The flying Eby family of Wakarusa includes, from left, Keri and Garrett Eby, Alicia and Adrian Dodd, Denise and David Eby, and Kristen and Ryan Eby. Sitting on the wing are Courtney Eby, Reyna Dodd and Kaitlin Eby.

Photo provided

David's wife Denise, who has taken flying lessons, appears to help out with communications. At times, all three men fly together to execute large orders for corporations such as See Corn.

David Eby claims crop protection technology has changed dramatically.

"It's been decades since dust was used, so 'crop-dusters' is a real misnomer," he said.

According to Eby, today's liquid sprays are far more controlled and far safer. Toxic materials are replaced by applications mimicking nature's way of protecting plants and flowers.

Chemically reproduced ingredients from chrysanthemums is an example he gives.

Both Eby sons majored in flight training and aeronautical mechanics -- Ryan at Vincennes University and Garrett at Purdue University. Besides pilot licenses, they have agricultural permits.

The Ebys' daughter, Alicia Eby Dodd, received her aviation technology degree at Purdue. After licensing as a private pilot, she earned a commercial license and, in another step up, an airline transport pilot certificate.

Her resume includes training pilots at Purdue and elsewhere, then piloting for a private charter company in Texas.

She now lives in Illinois with daughter Reyna and husband Adrian, who flies for Southwest Airlines.

The younger generation recounts colorful flying episodes. Among them is Garrett's soloing at age 15.

Underage for a driver's license, he would get to NorthWood High School by flying in the "Champ," one of two additional family-owned passenger planes.

"Luckily," he said "a farmer's grass landing strip was across the road."

Alicia reports that when co-piloting the chartered Gulfstreams in Texas, "one of my assignments was flying George W. Bush around during his first presidential primaries."

Ryan's story emphasizes why pilots stay alert -- especially flying 8 to 10 feet off the ground.

"A flock of geese suddenly rose up and headed right at me," he said. "I had the problem of visibility, plus avoiding the danger of one or more hitting the plane. It was scary."

Wondering what Ryan and Garrett do all winter?

In addition to raising families of their own and helping with their father's farm, where wheat, corn and soybeans grow, they check out and maintain all seven planes.

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