Living on the Edge: Aviation Passion and Safety Mindfulness
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I recently had the opportunity to meet a humble and down-to-earth drone pilot who is a contractor for one of the world’s largest media companies. David Smith, aka “Bama Dave”, with Star Aerial, has the unique opportunity to travel to a different city literally every week doing what he loves the most – flying.

Dave carries the same aviation passion as his father and grandfather. Dave’s father was a B17 pilot during World War II and Dave’s grandfather was also a manned pilot; and his license was signed by the Wright brothers.

The family tradition carried over to Dave and his other three siblings when they were told by their father if they wanted to get a Driver’s License, they would first need to solo a flight. At the age of 14, Dave obtained his student pilot license, and built his first remote controlled aircraft. At age 16, he soloed his first flight and at age 17 obtained his private pilot license. Dave’s very first passenger was his grandfather.

In the mid 2000’s, Dave started to build his own remote-controlled quad copters, attaching a Go-Pro camera, since fully-equipped drones with cameras were not yet available. Years later, Dave’s first DJI purchase was a S1000.

Approximately three years ago, Dave was recruited to be the very first drone pilot for one of the world’s largest media companies. Imagine traveling to a different city and higher educational institution every week and having to adapt to their respective rules and regulations around flying. When asked how he tackles this, Dave shares “The most important aspect of flying is safety. In fact, I start planning missions for other cities well in advance, sometimes up to 1.5 months in advance so I can get the appropriate FAA authorizations in place, as well as complying with University policies and procedures.” He proceeds to say “When I get onsite, I always walk the flight path to understand what obstacles need to be considered when flying to ensure safe operations.”

Dave’s work is aired on national television every week in the United States and while he takes his job seriously, stating “I don’t take this for granted, there is a lot of pressure to do things correctly”, he is having the time of his life while doing so. “At the age of 63, many people ask when I am going to retire, but when you are having the most fun in your 42-year career of working for yourself, why quit?” explains Dave.

Drone pilots and enthusiasts who wish to get into media production should “get as much [pilot] stick time as possible and network with as many people as possible” shares Dave and he continues “In this industry, it’s just as much as who you know as what you know. Expand your network by introducing yourself to local media companies, news agencies, realtors and any other sources where drones can be used.”
There is so much wisdom and value in Dave’s words. Life is certainly busy for many of us, yet taking the time to be humble, to connect with others and to never become complacent with safety, will help us move forward personally and professionally.