

. Cedar Falls man's avocation takes off by building planes

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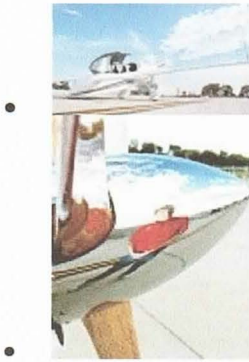
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[Buy this photo](#) Dennis Oelmann, of Cedar Falls, poses with his Cozy 3 vintage airplane, at left, as he holds his newly acquired award, at Livingston Aviation, in Waterloo, Iowa, on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2010. Oelmann's plane was self-built (without any formal training) by following drawings in 1989. Oelmann got the award at the Oshkosh air show, which he has been flying in every year, for his vintage aircraft. (DAWN J. SAGERT / Courier Staff Photographer)





CEDAR FALLS, Iowa - There are dreamers who will themselves to success in the business world, and there is Dennis Oelmann, who has taken the concept to heights that the Wright brothers would appreciate.

On the surface, Oelmann, 53, a food-safety inspector for the Iowa Department of Agriculture, would seem to blend into the workday world

That's how the Cedar Falls resident pays the bills.

He feeds his dream in the ethereal world of aviation.

And, he literally built that aspiration from the ground and worked his way up.

A little over 20 years ago, Oelmann, who has had no formal training, built himself an airplane in his garage in Evansdale, he said.

"My neighbor bet me \$100 I wouldn't finish it," he said.

Starting with nothing more than a set of instructions, Oelmann went to work.

"You get drawings and written instructions on how to do it and which suppliers you can buy materials to make it from," he said.

He spent about \$30,000 in 1989 dollars on materials and devoted 28 months to his project.

When he was finished, he had a three-seat Cozy III rear-engined craft capable to traveling 190 miles per hour.

His neighbor paid up on the bet.

"Now, he asks me to help him with hot rods he works on," Oelmann said.

Winning awards

Shortly after Oelmann finished the plane, he entered the Lindy Awards competition at the annual Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) AirVenture air show in Oshkosh, Wis., and came away with an Outstanding Workmanship prize.

It was not his last. Since then, he has won two more Lindys - including a Bronze Lindy in the Plans Champion category for Vintage Aircraft at the 2010 EAA show in July.

A second plane he built in 1999 - and subsequently sold - won a workmanship award at the 2000 show. Yet another, which was built with parts he designed and built, captured a Lindy in 1994.

Oelmann said he never received any formal training; he didn't attend college.

But, he says he has been passionate about aviation at least since his teens. In fact, he got his pilot's license at age 19 and even spent eight years as a part-time flight instructor at Livingston Aviation in Waterloo.

Then, he got an itch to build his own plane.

"Instructing is hard work, and I worried about my students," he said. "I just thought I'd just build my own airplane and enjoy flying."

That, he does. He has flown his creation from its permanent berth at Hangar 4 at the Waterloo Regional Airport to both the East and West coasts. If there are fish to be caught in Lake Michigan, he and a friend will fly to the shore in Wisconsin.

"It's an hour, as opposed to 5 1/2 by car," he said.

Seeing the dream through

Dreaming is easy; seeing a dream through is the tough part, Oelmann said.

He said he was fortunate to have aptitude that could live up to his dream.

"Not everybody has all the skills it takes to build an airplane," he said.

Oelmann said he couldn't do the job entirely alone.

"You have to find the people that can help you," he said. "I'm not very good at wiring, so I had to have somebody help me wire it."

He got now-retired UNI professor and fellow aviation enthusiast Rex Pershing to handle that job.

"He was also building a plane," he said. "We kind of built them at the same time."

In turn, Oelmann helped others build their own planes.

He designed and produced parts for Doug Koster, an aviation enthusiast from Aurora, Ill., who was inspired to build his own Cozy Mark IV by seeing Oelmann at the Oshkosh air show.

"I saw his airplane at several shows; it's a beautiful airplane, so I decided to build one like his," Koster said.

Koster added that Oelmann's expertise was invaluable in his own plane-building odyssey.

"He has a gift to build airplanes very well," Koster said.

Koster's plane won a Lindy award, in 1994.

"He's got a talent that's unbelievable," Koster said.

Oelmann has since branched off into other areas.

He has built parts for the U.S. Navy in 2007 for unmanned drones, built tractor hoods used by Deere & Co. and has built parts for other home-based airplane builders throughout the world. He says he has parts all over the world, including Australia, Italy, Russia, France, Germany, Israel, Singapore, Hawaii, Canada, South America and across the U.S.

"We consider him one of the prime resources of specialized talent we draw from," said Bob Diedrichs, president of Cedar Falls-based Diedrichs & Associates Inc., an engineering, design and building consulting firm that has contracted work to Oelmann.

"When we build a product prototype for a client to show to their upper, upper management, Dennis can help make that prototype look like a production model."

Oelmann says he doesn't have a pat explanation for his building skill.

"I just read the plans," he said. "If I buy something and read the plans and put it together, it's something that comes natural to me."

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