

OUT OF THE BLUE: A passion born when he was just 8 takes Tim West into the ethereal world of skywriting

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Tim West's passion was awakened when he was 8 years old, living outside the suburbs of Boston. During those blue-sky days of summer, he was mesmerized by a skywriter who spelled out "Fun+Games," advertising a local arcade.

"I'd sit there in my back yard in awe, just looking up," he recalls. "You could hardly see the airplane — you just saw the smoke coming out. I was always fascinated by that."

His story is similar to that of his mentor, Jim Butler of Aerial Sign Company, Inc., in Hollywood, Fla., who was also inspired at a tender age by the graceful letters a skywriter formed overhead. Although the art of skywriting has been around for decades, West says there are only about a dozen skywriters in the country today.

"You have to be on your game, all the time. Skywriting is a lot more mental than physical ability," he explains. "The secret of skywriting is learning all of the little innuendoes that have been passed down from one skywriter to another since the 1920s. For example, you have to know about finding perfectly smooth air — like when you're flying at night and you don't even feel like you're moving, you just feel the buzz of the airplane. If you don't find that smooth air, your letters are going to shear apart."

West first met his mentor in 1994, when he responded to Butler's ad for a banner towing school. Aerial Sign's school teaches all aspects of a banner towing operation, from sewing the banners and modifying the airplanes, to learning how to tow the banners. After going through the school, West was offered a pilot position, which he enthusiastically accepted. "I just really fell in love with where I was working, as well as the people. It's a family, and it's where I belong — I just luckily found my niche," he says quietly, his deep brown eyes sparkling in delight.

After towing banners for a while, West discovered that the company also had a skywriting airplane, and he embraced his childhood passion by learning aerial penmanship from one of the best. It's a type of penmanship that doesn't come quickly or easily — just try to visualize knowing when to put the smoke on and off while trying to write a 3000-foot tall letter T on a horizontal course. West describes it this way: "How do you know how far to push the pen across a page with no lines or borders, when you're writing real fast to make letters in mirror image? It's just practice and feel until it becomes instinctual. When you first start out, your skywriting looks like a third grader's writing. Your letters are a little crooked, and one letter may be bigger than the other one. I've got about 700 letters of skywriting now (he's paid by the letter), so I'm still fairly new. I know how to write the whole alphabet, but I'm constantly refining my penmanship."

The skywriting community is a small and close one, and it wasn't long before West met the "Fun+Games" skywriter of his youth, Wayne Mansfield. "It was really neat for me to come full circle and become a skywriter, and then meet the guy who was skywriting when I was a child, because that was my inspiration," West says. "It's funny, kids are the ones who get totally locked into a skywriter's message, because they have that fanciful imagination, and sense of awe and wonder."

Both banner towing and skywriting demand the skills of a highly accomplished stick and rudder pilot. West flies a modified Piper J-3 Cub for towing banners as large as 120 feet long by 50 feet high, and a modified Cessna 182, as well as a Rawdon T-1, for his skywriting jobs.

One of the things West enjoys the most about skywriting is "the reaction of the masses — that collective inspiration or enjoyment that people get out of it. Last year at West Palm Beach, one of the radio stations was having a contest to give away Garth Brooks tickets, and you had to call in and guess what the skywriter was writing. So I'm listening to the station on my Walkman as I'm writing the message, and I hear the people calling in and guessing. Then I'd get about halfway through, and somebody finally got the right answer. Some of those folks were at least 15 miles north of the city, and others were about six miles south, but they could all see the skywriting — it's just so neat. And if the skywriting touches just one of all the tens of thousands of kids who've seen our writing, that'd be great," concludes West with a heartwarming smile.

Little did the 8-year-old boy, who long ago so intently watched the skywriter perform his delicate yet demanding art by day, and dreamed at night in his airplane-wallpapered bedroom, realize that the sign in the sky he beheld was really the signpost pointing to his own passionate career.