

Directional Aviation Is A Does-It-All Business Aviation Conglomerate

William Garvey, October 31, 2019



FLEXJET

For all things there is season. For business aviation, the news harvest comes with the National Business Aviation Association's (NBAA) annual convention, held Oct. 22-24. And so, the headline cornucopia: Gulfstream unveils line-leading G700; Embraer nets \$1.4 billion Praetor sale; Aerion AS2 to burn biofuel exclusively; maintenance, repair and overhaul providers slammed with upgrades; charter broker/operator platform Tuvoli launches; and on and on . . .

But here's the thing: Despite the diversity of those announcements, a single entity is involved in all of them: Directional Aviation. And you ask, Who? No surprise there.

At a time when the spotlight shines on the bellicose and self-important, this Cleveland, Ohio-based outfit advances steadily—albeit often unheralded—with focus and determination. In doing so, it has evolved into a business aviation powerhouse that reaches into every part of the community. While its name may be unfamiliar to many, certain family members are easily recognized. These include fractional aircraft operations Flexjet and Flight Options; Nextant, remanufacturer of the 400XTi and 604XT aircraft; jet card provider Sentient Jet;

MRO specialist Constant Aviation; Sojourn Aviation, a used-aircraft broker; NI, a turbine engine and parts supplier; PrivateFly, a UK-based on-demand charter platform; and Simcom, the simulator-based training outfit, among others.

As for their news contributions: Flexjet is the Praetor buyer, along with being a launch customer for the G700. In addition, the first AS2s will

be joining Flexjet, which has signed for 10. Constant's shops are among those busily installing automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast units to meet the Jan. 1 deadline. And Directional launched Tuvoli (Italian for "you fly"), a charter-broker platform, just days prior to the NBAA show in Las Vegas.

The business aviation conglomerate is led by its founder, Kenn Ricci (see photo). A Cleveland native and graduate of the University of Notre Dame, Ricci had a passion for aviation which he pursued, eventually earning an airline transport pilot license and a flight engineer's slot with Northwest Airlines. But then came a furlough notice. He shifted to flying charters and operating Gulfstream, Falcon and Citation business jets. He liked the unscheduled world a lot.

Ricci's entrepreneurial ascent began in 1981 with the acquisition of Corporate Wings, an aircraft management and charter operation, which grew rapidly and steadily expanded its service offerings. In 1998, he created Flight Options, a unique fractional provider that kept the cost of entry low by operating used aircraft. Three years later, he merged it with Raytheon's fractional operation and then sold it a majority stake. With that, he assumed the CEO position at



DIRECTIONAL AVIATION

Directional Aviation founder Kenn Ricci.

Mercury Air Group, in which he had invested. After realigning its operations, he sold that for \$615 million. Then in 2008, Directional Aviation, an investment group he had founded five years earlier, took control of the fractional operation he had created in Cleveland a decade earlier. He's never looked back.

In 2009, even though business aviation was suffering in the Great Recession, Flight Options added new Embraer Phenom 300s to its fleet. Nextant launched its Beechjet/Hawker 400 reengining program in 2010, for which it received the Business Aviation Laureate from Aviation Week & Space Technology. Sentient was acquired in 2012, and the following year added Bombardier's FlexJet to the family. Directional has continued on its growth curve, adding Gulfstream jets and, eventually, Mach+ trans-

oceanic aircraft as well.

My first exposure to Ricci came in a visit to Flight Options' Cuyahoga County Airport ops center on Cleveland's east side during its early years. The excitement and ambition he conveyed then have reverberated through the many encounters we've had since. And it seems that every time, he was beaming his million-dollar smile. But that description short-changes him.

Directional, through its holdings, rightly notes it has become "a multi-billion-dollar force" in aviation. As a private investment firm, it need not disclose its returns, but one measure of its success might be Ricci's bona fide philanthropy. He donated \$5 million to create a permanent home for Notre Dame's "Fighting Irish" band, of which he was once a member, and \$2 million to help Cleveland's UH Rainbow Babies and Children's

Hospital conduct research to fight cystic fibrosis (CF), a condition afflicting one of his three children. And then in 2017, he and his wife, Pamela, donated \$100 million to Notre Dame, the largest unrestricted gift in the Indiana university's history.

For Ricci and Directional, the season for planting and harvesting continues unabated. And as to the question of "Who?" they might redirect the answer to their beneficiaries, who range from kids with CF and tuba players to busy Cleveland pilots, technicians and a whole lot of satisfied people saving time aloft.

William Garvey

Bill has been Editor-in-Chief of Business & Commercial Aviation since 2000. During his stewardship at Business & Commercial Aviation, the monthly magazine has received dozens of awards for editorial excellence.