

# Charles 'Chick' Gregg and Mark Neubauer

Sanford, Florida



Air Unlimited

## *Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Charles 'Chick' Gregg and Mark Neubauer:*

For Charles 'Chick' Gregg and Mark Neubauer, Owners of Orlando/Sanford based Air Unlimited, owning and operating a business in the aviation industry is an opportunity to put their passion to work. After successful careers in construction and real estate development, they recognized an opportunity to provide a niche service and took action. Chick and Mark shared the story behind their entrepreneurial journey and explained how they built their business and what their plans are for the future.

"I was born in Orlando, but grew up in Leesburg," Chick said. "My background is in Civil and Structural Engineering. I was in the construction business for nearly 20 years. I served as the COO of Reynolds, Smith & Hills in Jacksonville, FL, and as a partner with a company called Greater Homes. After we sold Greater Homes in 2005, I

got bored. That's when Mark and I started talking."

"I'm an Air Force brat," said Mark. "I've lived in 13 states and two countries. I've also lived all over Florida. My background consists of 35 years in real estate home building and development. When I 'retired' in 2007, I was in a similar situation as Chick. I wanted to find a way to integrate my passion and my 30 plus years of flying into a business."

Air Unlimited officially launched in July 2013. The niche Mark and Chick discovered was an opportunity to provide scheduled "by the seat" transportation to and from the Bahamas.

"At the time, Central Florida was definitely underserved when it came to flights to the Bahamas," Mark said. "With the ability to offer more of a private experience and a flight time of only one hour and fifteen minutes, we knew there was a market for our services."

Mark and Chick started the business with two Cessna 421 aircraft and one Cessna Citation Mustang Jet. As they shared, the first few years were tough. Upfront expenses were extremely high and it took time to get the word out. However, they stuck with it and by year four in operation, everything started to come together.

"A lot of it came down to getting the right people in place," Mark said. "We wanted our business and pilots to be very customer-oriented. To be honest, it wasn't too hard to raise the bar compared to the service you get when you fly commercially. It's about being nice and creating a personalized experience."

Mark added, "Our slower growth was actually a good thing for us. It gave

us the advantage of being able to grow at a pace that the market would allow. We were able to plan for the long-term and, in that process, we developed a strong repeat customer base. Our customers can enjoy the experience of prop and jet transportation with a personal touch.”

Mark and Chick utilized a PR firm to spread the word through digital, print and social media marketing. They also made contacts in the islands, built relationships with hotel operators and fishing tournaments and bought ads in magazines distributed throughout the Bahamas. The efforts paid off as more and more word of mouth referrals began to fuel the growth of the business.

“It started with local folks,” Chick said. “We now get customers from all over the United States. We’ve even had people from Abu Dhabi.”

Mark added, “We now get a lot of repeat customers. Many of our passengers have second homes in the islands. It’s such a special place and it’s right near us. We truly enjoy sharing it with people.”

About a year ago, is when Air Unlimited hit its peak. With five flights per day, they were transporting nearly 1,000 passengers per month during their summer season. Two years prior they also added their own maintenance department – a large investment, but one that saves the company considerable time and money. Unfortunately, in early September 2019, Hurricane Dorian wreaked havoc on the Bahamas and much of their charter and scheduled flights evaporated overnight. Fortunately, they discovered a new opportunity to use their passion and skills to save lives.

“We started doing more Medivac flights to transport donor organs, Chick

said. “We’ll pick up surgical teams in Tampa, Orlando and other cities throughout the Southeast and bring them and the harvested organs to their destination for transplant in the new recipient. It keeps us pretty busy all hours of the day and night.”

Mark added, “It’s a great opportunity and one we’re very happy to be part of. I love the satisfaction of helping to save lives. The human heart for example has a very limited time to be safely moved – approx. up to four hours – so it’s imperative that everything is executed efficiently and effectively. We’re applying every skill we have to the entire flight process. It’s a big challenge for us, but it’s extremely rewarding.”

Looking ahead, Mark and Chick are looking forward to regaining some momentum after COVID-19 temporarily grounded much of their business. They’re also focused on expanding their Medivac services by hiring additional pilots and purchasing more aircraft.

“Because we might get a call and need to be airborne in less than an hour, we’re looking at having bases with aircraft and pilots in other areas of the southeast US,” Mark said. “We see this side of the business really taking off.”

What advice do Mark and Chick have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “My best advice is to understand how important working capital is,” Chick said. “Most people always underestimate working capital. It’s hard to get it from the banks. They’ll loan on assets, but not on working capital.

Also, people need to understand that starting a business is a tough proposition. They also need to understand that the first year or two will be a battle.”

Mark added, "In addition to those things, it's also important to learn all you can about that business before going into it. Spend some time doing homework and learn from others mistakes in the same industry before you jump in. Also, start out conservatively and part time until you see if your idea has legs and can grow at a manageable pace. Sometimes growing too fast can be a bad thing. Lastly, stay flexible with your business plan, be open to other areas of revenue and always watch your expenses."

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