



Maryville

[SPRING 2012]

MAGAZINE

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P I L O T
W I T H
A
P U R P O S E

BY BETSY TAYLOR

As an engineer, lay pastor, pilot, former VP at McDonnell Douglas and current chair of Wings of Hope, Maryville Alumnus Larry Lemke, '86 has always followed his instincts and his heart.



Sid Hastings

PREPPED FOR FLIGHT: Lemke poses next to engine Piper Seneca before a winter miss

YOUNG PASSENGER: Jacob Gardner, 7, of Springdale, Ark., plays with a model plane while waiting at the Wings of Hope offices to board a flight home.



Sid Hastings



AT THE WINGS OF HOPE GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS AT THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS AIRPORT IN Chesterfield, Mo., Larry Lemke, '86, prepares to pilot a medical air transport flight to take a 7-year-old boy and his mother back to their Arkansas home.

Lemke runs through a pre-flight checklist in a hangar located right next to the offices, then uses a powered towbar to guide a plane outside for fuel. While Lemke prepares the plane for flight, young Jacob Gardner picks up a model plane inside the office, gliding it through the air. The Springdale, Ark., boy was born with a right club foot and required surgery at Shriners Hospitals for Children-St. Louis, long known for free care to children with orthopedic conditions.

Jacob arrived in town for his medical appointment thanks to Wings of Hope, a nonprofit that helps the world's sick or poor people using planes to deliver relief and to fly the ill to receive treatment. The boy may not have realized it, but his pilot, Lemke, is the international organization's chair. And the flight Jacob is on—his first time on a plane—allowed him to get to the hospital more than 300 miles from his home. "My car wouldn't have made it," notes his mother, Jennifer Gardner, 29.

At its most fundamental level, Lemke says Wings of Hope has a clear mission: "Very simply, what Wings of Hope is all about is helping the poor and needy people of the world." Last spring, Wings of Hope was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The nomination led to increased recognition for the organization, founded in 1962, and the work it does both domestically and abroad. Wings of Hope provides medical care, education and hands-on support for sustainable projects to provide relief and combat poverty in more than 40 countries. That work includes providing fully equipped medical air ambulances to get people, like Jacob, to the treatment they need.

Wings of Hope has a dedicated staff and more than 3,000 volunteers around the world who make their work a reality, the sort of people who can fly planes, communicate across continents and accomplish things in remote areas. But Lemke's leadership as chair has played an important role in the nonprofit's success. As he tells his life story, Lemke, now 73, speaks of his choices and how they contributed to the skill set he offers to Wings of Hope.

"Life deals you various cards, and you pick some up, and some you don't," he explains. Lemke grew up on a farm in Casey, Iowa. While at Casey High School, he and a friend met a girl while they were detasseling corn together, a laborious job familiar to many teens looking to earn some money in agricultural communities. That girl soon brought a friend with her to the Iowa State Fair, and that's when Lemke met his future wife, Janet. The couple has been married more than 50 years and had three children, Cindy, Cheri and Craig. Craig died in 2009 from small cell lung cancer. And Janet was also fighting cancer when Lemke spoke to *Maryville Magazine*.

NEW SCHOOL: Volunteer Mary Jean Russell (left), Larry Lemke, '86, (back) and Wings of Hope Deputy Chair Roger Debenport (right) pose with tribal leaders and children of the South American indigenous group, the Achuar, in a newly-built primary school in eastern Ecuador in 2009. The Achuar are one of five principal indigenous groups Wings of Hope works with in South America.



"As a person, Larry exemplifies the American spirit in every possible way. He has endless energy."

Douglas Clements, president of Wings of Hope

After graduating from Casey High School in 1956, Lemke had a scholarship to play football in college, but instead enrolled in the Air Force seven days out of high school. It was a decision that started him down the path toward electronic engineering, central to his professional life for many years.

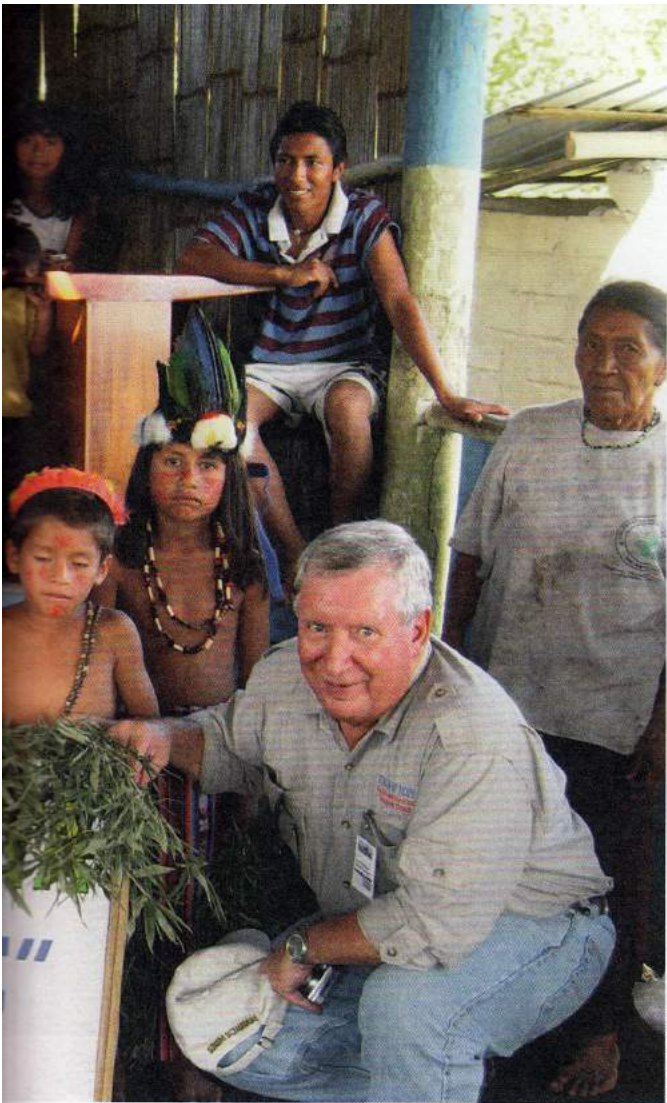
He wasn't training to become a pilot in the Air Force, but Lemke decided to take flying lessons anyway. As he explains: "I was enlisted at the time as an electronics technician. I was working with all these guys who were flying airplanes, and they were learning how to operate the radar that was in the airplane." He says with a laugh, "I finally said to myself, 'If these guys can fly an airplane, let me tell you something, I think I can.'"

While he was stationed in Sherman, Texas, he began visiting the Air Force aero club, where a master sergeant told him if he

had learned how to ride a bicycle, he could learn how to fly a plane. That's just what he did, learning to become a pilot.

The young husband and father took college classes at Austin College while in Texas and continued them at Oklahoma City University, where he graduated with a bachelor's of science in engineering in 1963. Lemke knew what it was to struggle, with long days in the military and classes to attend at night. While in Oklahoma, he'd borrow money every semester to pay for tuition and books, then pay it back only to need to borrow money again the next semester. When he got a job at the aerospace company Martin Marietta in Colorado, he also borrowed \$20 to get there.

In 1964, the Lemke family moved to St. Louis where Lemke began working for McDonnell Douglas, first as an electronics engineer, then as a supervisor. In time, he rose to become the



Douglas Clements

vice president who oversaw the F/A-18 fighter and attack jet program.

It was also where he got his master's degree from Maryville University. Maryville professors would visit the McDonnell Douglas campus, where a few dozen employees took classes for a master's of science in management after their work shift ended. Lemke said he knows how hard it can be to get a college degree and a graduate education, commenting that "he'd never taken a class during the day" after high school.

While completing his Maryville degree in 1986, he worked for McDonnell Douglas as the program manager of quality and productivity. McDonnell Douglas paid for the Maryville education, which helped his career advance. "For me, it was very, very helpful, because two years later, I made vice president," Lemke notes. He retired from the aerospace company in 1993, and his U.S. Navy customer created a new leadership award in his name.

At age 54, he began studying to become a Lutheran lay pastor, and was consecrated in 1995. He provided pastoral care at his church, Trinity Lutheran in Chesterfield, and stepped up his work with Lutheran Family and Children's Services. It wasn't a small commitment. He and his wife, Janet, had

previously become foster parents and took in about 70 children over a decade.

In 1995, Lemke also was tapped to volunteer with Wings of Hope by Don Malvern, a former McDonnell Douglas president, who was the Wings of Hope chair at the time.

Wings of Hope began when four businessmen in the St. Louis area heard about a nun in Africa who was providing aid with a plane that kept needing repairs. Baboons were literally eating fabric off the plane's wings. The Americans provided the woman with a plane constructed with more metal, and began finding other planes that could be donated to provide relief and medical aid around the world.

Current Wings of Hope leaders describe Lemke's involvement as an important addition to the work the organization does. He became Wings of Hope chair in 2004. Douglas Clements, president of Wings of Hope, says, "As a person, Larry exemplifies the American spirit in every possible way. He has endless energy." Clements cites Lemke's ability to tackle challenges by thinking about what must be done to overcome them, and how to best do that. "He's an outdoorsman. He's incredibly hard working. He's very creative," Clements says. These traits were just recognized last fall by the National Aeronautic Association, which presented Lemke with the 2011 Distinguished Volunteer of the Public Benefit Flying Award.

Lemke explains that the places where Wings of Hope works are often remote, and sometimes have only rudimentary airstrips for pilots to land. "You normally make a low pass, and get rid of the cattle and horses that are out there—and kids, by the way. When the children hear the airplane coming, they're there because they know you're bringing something." He says Wings of Hope pilots routinely fly with candy or other treats to give to children.

But the work provides more than good will; it saves lives. He recalls a mission where he helped a woman in Guatemala. "One was taking a pregnant woman who was having trouble in childbirth out of the village where she was at and flying her into a city that had a hospital. Then, about a week later, she shows up at our airstrip in the city, along with other people. Then she's sitting in the back of the plane, along with her newborn and the chicken and potatoes. I mean it's absolutely amazing how people around the world live, and what we can do to help."

Lemke's unique experiences—growing up on a farm, serving in the Air Force and as a McDonnell Douglas executive and his work as a lay pastor—seem to have prepared him perfectly for what he's doing now.

"I'm one of those people who has different chapters to his life, and once I go from Chapter 9 to Chapter 10, I kind of put Chapter 9 behind me and focus on the next one." He says this current chapter of his life is focused on his work at Wings of Hope. "Right now, this is my focus and probably will be for the rest of my healthy life. Like it or not, being at the right place at the right time has a lot to do with where you end up." ■