

https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/kanawha_valley/we-think-hes-still-around-here-mallory-airport-owners-keeping-founders-memory-and-mission-alive/article_48f09f0a-6dd2-5ced-a4cc-92e3c4250ae9.html

'We think he's still around here': Mallory Airport owners keeping founder's memory and mission alive

By Josh Ewers joshewers@hdmediallc.com

Apr 15, 2023

4 of 10



When a pilot's approach doesn't line up the first time, they can always circle back around.

In October, the family of pilot, storyteller and teacher Benny Mallory auctioned off the tiny, harrowing hilltop airport he built on his family's strawberry field back in the 1950s to former state legislator and pilot Mike Folk.

That initial sale fell through, but after first coming up short at auction, a few of the many light aircraft pilots whose lives Mallory touched banded together and reached agreement with his family to purchase the property, about two miles south of South Charleston High School, for \$400,000.

Now they hope to make some repairs and enlist certified flight instructors to recommence with teaching the art of aviation for the first time in years at a place that's produced hundreds of pilots, commercial and otherwise.

—

On a warm spring evening, five of the six new co-owners gathered at an empty hangar and sat down in a semi-circle of folding metal chairs.

"The pilot community is a pretty tight-knit group and the last thing we want to see is that disappear, especially around here," co-owner Brett Staples said. "Small fields like ours have been disappearing left and right."

For the vibrant collection of characters behind the Mallory community, whose planes now fill about half the weathered space they did decades ago, the facility is more than a convenient strip of asphalt.

"He just had a calming sense and it attracted people," new co-owner Marlin Witt said of its founder, Benny Mallory, who died in June 2022. "He made everybody welcome when they came up."

Staples, 55, first came to Mallory Airport 45 years ago, when he sat on a hill overlooking the now 2,000-foot-long, 24-foot-wide runway for the first time as an awestruck 10-year-old.

From the elevated spot, he gazed into the wild blue yonder with wonder.

"From that day forward, I would come up literally every day of the week," Staples said. "If it was during school, I'd ride the school bus to here instead of home. I helped them work on planes, mow the grass, wash planes, whatever was needed."

Staples parlayed his persistence into flying lessons under the laid-back-but-focused tutelage of Mallory, who nurtured his skill to a level where he was flying solo before he could legally drive.

"He was like a father to a lot of people," Staples said. "I say it all the time, he was like my adopted dad, but he was that way to everybody."

Suddenly swept away to his teenage years, Staples recalled a night where he found himself unlicensed and behind the wheel during a night of drinking. Days later, a then 15-year-old Staples and Mallory were alone in a hangar repairing a plane engine.

"It was just the two of us. Here we are, two of us down on stools side by side, both of us have our hands up in the engine," Staples recalled. "And he goes, 'I hear you were out the other night.' ... My heart about stopped right there."

Staples paused to collect himself.

"I just wanted to just crawl under the concrete. ... In a real fatherly way, he goes, 'Do you think that was very smart?' And he didn't have to say hardly anything else at all. I never wanted to disappoint Benny. He's always watching."

When co-owner David Hill first came to the airport for lessons, he was a middle-aged accountant going through a midlife crisis.

Mallory's prodigious skill as a pilot -- 30,000-50,000 hours of flight time, depending who you asked, and merit-based transport of everyone from President John F. Kennedy to Boston Red Sox great Ted Williams -- was striking to Hill.

"He didn't fly a plane, he wore it," Hill said with a serious expression. "He just literally became one with the plane."

Hill softened as he remembered some of his earliest lessons, when Mallory's age was slowly beginning to catch up with him.

"If he was going with you he'd fall asleep. And at some point, his eyes are still closed, and you'd hear, 'You're going a little too fast on that brake,'" Hill said with a laugh.

But it was Mallory's lessons in landing that still stand out in Hill's mind.

—

"I was struggling with the tension, so I went around in a circle a couple of times," Hill explained. "He said, 'David, let me show you something.' We're coming over the hill and he just does this [motioning his hand in a complicated looping pattern] and just kisses it on the runaway."

"I said, 'How'd you do that?' He said, 'You just gotta tell the plane who's boss.'"

Co-owner Tom White had his first solo flight right before Yeager Airport shut down its flight school in the 1990s.

But White, with windswept hair and a poet's spirit, soon found a kindred spirit in Mallory.

"I was moping around the house trying to figure out what I'm gonna do ... I'm looking at all these hangars and I'm going like, 'A ha, this is where I belong,'" White said with a grin. "I don't need Yeager or fancy stuff."

Taking to the skies, he said, gives him something more than a means of travel.

"Flying to me is really one of the few times when you're actually completely in control of your life, whether you live or die. God's got nothing to do with it. Hope has nothing to do with it. You are in charge," White said.

"And I think one of the things that kind of makes pilots like one another is that they all understand that. ... In my experience, I don't have any control over anything else in my life at all, except that."

White recalled a time when Mallory reflected on his decision to build an airport that operated on thin margins.

"He said, 'I could have gone to the airlines, but that's like driving a bus. This is different and it is different because you have to deal with all different kinds of people, all different

—

kinds of flying, and all different kinds of airplanes," White said. "'With the airlines you fly one thing, one route until you get assigned to another.' ... He said that sounded to him like as boring a life as he could imagine."

Instead, Mallory chose to cater to White and other newcomers like him who looked upward with longing and made the impossibility of leaving the ground an endeavor within reach.

"He was the kind of guy that when you came in and you had pay him something, first thing out of his mouth with me was, 'Dave, do you need that money?'" Hill said. "That's just the way he was. If you needed the money more than he did, it didn't bother him."

"That's what he'd ask me too," White said. "All the time."

David Chenoweth, a high school friend of Hill's, remembered lighter times.

"[Benny] always sat in the office where he could see the final approach and he watched every airplane come in. ... He'd be asleep in the office in there and somebody would come in and go '3-2-0 final!' and he'd wake up," Chenoweth said, mimicking Mallory's startled reaction and drawing more than a little laughter. "He'd say, 'If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be asleep.'"

It was with their friend's memory still vivid that the five pilots, along with Bill Peters, reasoned to grab the yoke with all the delicate firmness of Mallory's 'bear claw' and navigate his beloved airport into the future.

"We just want to see more people learning to fly and flying because it is a phenomenal community," Staples said. "It's been with me my entire life. I just can't imagine not having it."

After wistfully reminiscing in the empty hangar, the men made their way out to the

nearby runway where they were greeted by a calm spring evening, the kind perfect for flying.

As they walked, Staples motioned to the rolling hills and tree line at the end of the runway, explaining the necessary precision that gives the airport its trying reputation.

"People say sometimes if you can fly out of Mallory you can probably land anywhere," White said. "That may be true."

Staples turned his attention to the small hill where he first sat watching planes embark with childlike wonder all those years ago.

"We think he's still around here," Staples said. "We all talk to him a good bit."

Hill followed, looking to the summit where Mallory now rests.

"He keeps an eye on us."

Josh Ewers is a reporter and can be reached at 304-348-1723 or email joshewers@hdmediallc.com.

MORE INFORMATION





VIDEO: Mallory Airport

📷 PHOTOS: Mallory Airport ready for takeoff

Josh Ewers

Reporter