

Ann Arborites

Ed Steinman

Flying for the environment

Some days, Ed Steinman works with computer databases at the U-M School of Dentistry. Others, he flies a small airplane as a volunteer for environmental causes—perhaps taking up a photographer to document runoff from factory farms in west Michigan, or showing a group of politicians or journalists the damage done by mining operations in Appalachia.

Steinman draws a paycheck from the U-M, but he donates his time and talents as a pilot, and even the hourly fees for the six-seat Piper Saratoga he co-owns as a member of the Ann Arbor Flyers. He does it because he hopes to help come up with solutions to serious environmental problems.

Steinman flies mainly for two nonprofit organizations—LightHawk and SouthWings—that assist environmental groups and scientists. Though mostly a quiet man, he grows animated describing the damage he has glimpsed on these flights, like entire mountaintops leveled by mining. “It’s thousands of acres,” he says. “It looks like sand pits. They nearly completely fill the rivers with the debris.”

“You can see the pollution pouring into the rivers” when flying over some huge farms, he says. He’s also seen kelp beds that have been restored and replenished off the coast of California—and the delight in the eyes of a scientist observing the project’s results.

“For Ed, to do flying for a good cause is just the best,” says his wife, Rita Mitchell.

A short man, Steinman has a bushy gray mustache and long ponytail that give him the air of an aging hippie. He and Mitchell live on the Old West Side in a comfortable home stocked with mementos and art from their travels.

A Detroit native, Steinman was introduced to aviation as a child when his father took flying lessons. He remembers going to the airport with his dad and once or twice being allowed to come along in the plane. His father never got a pilot’s license, but the experience of flying, with his dad’s feet on the rudder pedals, stuck in Steinman’s memory.

He studied zoology at the U-M in the late 1960s, and says his commitment to environmental causes may have grown out of his love of nature and study of science. “I have an appreciation of living things and the natural world, and how complicated it is,” he says.

After graduating, he worked in his father’s wholesale sporting goods business for a while and then joined the staff at Detroit’s Sinai Hospital, where he discovered an interest and aptitude for working with computers. And along the way, he rediscovered flying. When he was in his early thirties, he kept passing by a small airport



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in Troy and “it made it rattle around in my head,” he says. “One day I called up the airport and asked them about flying.” He took a \$10 ride and was hooked. Within about a year, he had his license.

In 1987 he moved back to Ann Arbor, and in 1991 he went to work at the U-M. By then he was flying a lot—mostly for fun, though he also helped fly researchers around the Upper Peninsula to study forests and waterways.

Then a friend at Mott Children’s Hospital recruited him for a local group called Mercy Med, who provided free air transport for people with chronic or serious medical needs. He says they’ve since stopped operating, so he’s applied to join a similar national organization, Angel Flight. Meanwhile, a few times a year, he helps with the nonprofit Dreams and Wings for Kids program, giving sick children and their families brief joyrides around Ann Arbor. He usually flies them around Whitmore Lake and over their homes if they live in the area. “The kids like to do climbs, so it feels like a roller coaster,” he says. “They are very quiet, and you think they’re not paying attention.” Then when the plane dives steeply, he will hear a squeal or a “Yippee!”

On one Dreams flight, a child’s mother vomited from all the ups and downs. “Her daughter thought it was kind of funny—Mom threw up,” Steinman recalls. “And afterward, Mom congratulated her kid on doing better than she did.”

Also active in environmental causes on the ground, Steinman set up the website for the greenbelt ballot initiative in 2003. “He’s a happy activist, not an angry activist,” says Doug Cowherd, president of the Sierra Club’s local chapter. Steinman joined its board of directors about two years ago. “Ed comes to volunteer work with a minimum of ego and a maximum of spirit to get it done,” says Cowherd. “You can always count on Ed to do what he says he’ll do and to do it with one-hundred-percent focus on what’s best for the cause, not what appeals to him personally.” In the air, “Ed will do anything and everything he can to help conservation work with aircraft, including ferrying very long distances,” says former LightHawk executive director Rick Durden.

Steinman cut back to half time at the university a couple years ago, partly so he’d have more time for environmental flights. He plans to reduce his hours again by summer so that he can take on longer missions—including some to Central or South America.

Steinman figures he spends thousands of dollars a year on fuel and other costs. It’s worth it, he says, to help his passengers get a new perspective on environmental problems. “If you become depressed about these problems,” he says, “the inspiration is that there are these effective, dedicated people” seeking solutions.

—Vickie Elmer