

What did you learn today?

A brother's gift of flight

On the back door of the flight school where I have worked for the past 15 years is a sign that reads, "What did you learn today?"

In those 15 years I have trained hundreds of pilots. I have also gained a reputation for being very tough on my students. Most of them joke about the hard road they endured to earn their ratings, but they know that I work just as hard for them. I try to know my material, and I do my very best to produce good pilots and flight instructors. I have also developed a pretty good instinct for a candidate's chance of success. But I'm not sure that I ever had a good answer to the question on the back door.

One day my brother Mark came to the school and said he wanted to learn to fly. That would not be so unusual if Mark hadn't been in a wheelchair. A car accident shortly after his twentieth birthday had left him a paraplegic. Undeterred, he then learned to skydive, only to have his parachute fail 10,000 feet above the ground-but he survived that, too.

Now Mark was 35 years old, overweight, and in bad physical shape, but he had a bright smile and a great sense of humor. I had never worked with a handicapped student before, and I asked bluntly, "Can you even get in an airplane by yourself?" He smiled. "Well, I got this far, did I not?" he quipped in a bad British accent.

I agreed to give it a try, but I was anything but encouraging. I didn't know anything about hand controls for airplanes. Mark, however, had done his homework. He had located and purchased a set of hand controls for a Cessna 172, complete with paperwork and instructions, and the mechanic installed them while Mark and I watched. Afterward, I showed him how to preflight the Cessna and then told him to get inside.

Mark struggled for more than 30 minutes to hoist himself into the airplane, turning first one way and then the other. I offered no help; I just glared at him. Finally I told him, "If you're going to be a pilot, then you're going to have to be able get in and out of the aircraft by yourself, and you're going to have to preflight without my help." Mark looked a little hurt, but remained confident. "I'll get this worked out," he said. "But are you always going to be this surly?" "Just give me the checklist," I barked. And we were off on flight lesson number one.

Mark did fairly well, even though the hand controls were complicated and difficult for him to use, but after we landed, I had to fetch his wheelchair and help him out of the airplane. Then came the greatest insult to a flight instructor: I had to push the airplane back and chain it down.

I didn't even try to hide my bad attitude toward the extra effort and argued with Mark all the way to the office. The mechanic was none too pleased about having to install the hand controls and then remove them after each flight. He argued with Mark about the legality of the controls until Mark produced the documentation and politely reminded him that certain laws were in place to grant Mark the same access as anyone else.

I signed Mark's logbook and made another appointment for the following weekend. I didn't really expect him to return. But the next weekend came, and so did Mark. He wrestled his wheelchair out of his car, lifted himself from the car to the chair, and rolled to the wheelchair ramp at the back of the building. He came inside and signed out the airplane, greeted me with a cheerful smile, and headed back to the ramp. I started from my chair, resigned to having to preflight the airplane again. Mark stopped me. "I've got it under control," he said.

He had rigged up a gadget to get fuel samples and paid the line boy to pull out the airplane for him and dip the tanks. Mark spoke with the mechanic he had argued with only the week before, and even had him laughing as the hand controls were installed. Perhaps most impressive, after 20 minutes of serious struggle Mark made it to the pilot seat by himself. I got in the right seat, and Mark grinned. "Hand me the checklist, will you?"

I couldn't help but be impressed. The flight went well, and when we returned he said, "See you inside." I had no idea how he intended to push the high-winged airplane back into the space, much less tie it down. It turned out that Mark had arranged for one of the line personnel to do the manual labor. He never mentioned it, and I never let on that I knew. He never expected me to push back the airplane again.

When the airplane was put away, Mark came to my office with his logbook and said, "How am I doing so far?" "Well, not too bad, I guess," I grumbled. He just smiled.

This went on for several months. Each week Mark was a few pounds lighter and a little faster. He was never in a bad mood, and he never complained. And when he wasn't flying, you could generally find him

surrounded by laughing and chattering instructors and students, telling one joke after another-usually at my expense.

One weekend Mark went for a ride with a friend in a low-wing airplane. He discovered he was able to get around that little airplane as easily as a gymnast. I had some money in the bank, so I offered to buy a low-wing trainer if Mark would find the right one. He found the perfect airplane for a great price: a Piper Cherokee.

Mark loved that little airplane. The hand controls were easy to use, and he could install and remove them without help, as well as get his chair in and out of the back seat; his independence was complete. His flying was improving in leaps as well, and I could tell that he wanted to solo. Even more than that, I could tell that Mark wanted to hear me say that he was doing a good job. In fact, Mark could land the little airplane as well as any student I had ever worked with, but he was my brother. I wasn't about to tell him.

One weekend, we decided on a short cross-country flight to Glendale Municipal Airport, which had a cafe with a patio. With me in the right seat, Mark completed several passable landings, and I decided that today would be his day. "Pull over to the restaurant," I said. "And park out front." Mark offered to buy lunch, but I took his logbook and medical certificate instead. "No, you won't," I told him as I made the endorsements. "At least not until you take this thing around the patch a few times."

When I finished writing, I looked at my brother. Mark's dark-brown eyes were shining. He reminded me of the kid I'd grown up with-the boy with the world at his feet.

As the Cherokee taxied to the active runway, I sat at a table on the small patio and tuned in the tower frequency on my handheld radio. When Mark received clearance, the airplane roared down the centerline and practically leapt into the air. His first landing was picture-perfect, and he raced down the runway for his next two landings. I was so proud that I almost cried. I remembered my own first solo and the feeling of freedom and power that is an experience like none other. One of the local pilots asked me if I had a student in the pattern. "I sure do," I said. "That's my brother."

Mark finished his three landings and pulled into the parking space closest to the patio. I tried to act disinterested while he struggled out onto the

wing, assembled his wheelchair, and took a half-hour to tie down the airplane before making his way over to the patio. I tried not to look at him, because I did not want him to see the tears in my eyes. **The pride was overwhelming.**

A small crowd formed as I pulled out a pair of scissors. "It's time for the magic shears," I said. "Lean forward." He did, and I cut a large section out of the back of his T-shirt, then handed him a new one I had purchased from the pilot shop.

Mark bought lunch and accepted congratulations, and his happiness blanketed us all. As we headed back out to the airplane, he said, "You know, I may not have legs that work, but now I have wings instead. Not a bad trade, all in all." We pulled up to the flight school ramp and once again I was confronted by the sign that asked, "What did you learn today?" Today, I had the answer. Today, I learned that to be a flight instructor is a privilege that few careers could match. Today, a man who could no longer walk flew instead. And I had given him his wings.

By Mike Garcia

Editor's note: Mark Garcia became an instrument-rated private pilot. In 2001, while pursuing a commercial certificate, he died of complications resulting from the auto accident that made him a paraplegic.

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