JAMES
PRATER,

THE
DRUMMING
DOM

If you’re looking for James Prater on a Sunday morning, follow your ears. The pounding pulse of rock ‘n’ roll drums will lead you to a Calvary Community Church in Lincoln, Nebraska.

“I try to bring a solid rock influence to our music there,” Prater says. “As a drummer, I’m a big fan of Metallica and Rush, as well as Christian rock bands like The Newsboys, Casting Crowns, and Mercy Me.”

Most other days, you can find James Prater at Duncan Aviation, serving as Airframe Services Manager. “I really see maintenance management as my niche,” he tells Aviation Maintenance magazine. “Being a mechanic myself, I understand the technical aspects of the work we do. At the same time, I can speak the language of
Directing an aviation maintenance department is a demanding job, especially as rapid technological change continues to transform the MRO world. We throw the spotlight on a mechanic who epitomizes the new breed of manager.

BY JAMES CARELESS

upper management. This allows me to bridge the gap between two very different worlds. Mechanics tend to think in terms of what’s wrong and how to fix it, while managers prefer to focus on what’s right and build on it.”

Prater has been at Duncan Aviation since 2000, when he started as a Level 2 mechanic on the shop floor. “I grew up with aviation,” he says. “My father was always fascinated with airplanes. He kept trying to get his pilot’s certificate. He’d take lessons until the money ran out, then pick up it again when he could afford to.”

James Prater’s father never did get his pilot’s certificate. But the time he and his son spent at airports paid off. “I got interested in flying after spending so much time around airplanes, and I always did have a knack for fixing mechanical things,” Prater says. “So when it came time to go to college in 1989, I enrolled in LeTourneau University in Longview, Texas. LeTourneau is a private interdenominational Christian college that offers both pilot and aviation maintenance training. Going there allowed me to be qualified in both areas of aviation.”

After graduating in 1994, James Prater stayed on at LeTourneau as a flight instructor. Two years later, he changed roles and became the university’s assistant director of maintenance. “I’d done a lot of work on our Pipers when I was a student, helping out on major projects during Christmas break and over the summers,” Prater says. “It was a busy schedule, because the Pipers and then the Cessnas that replaced them had to be serviced at night so that they could be flown during the day.”

In 2000, James Prater left Longview, Texas for a job at Duncan Aviation in Lincoln. “It was a career move and a family move,” he says. “I decided to focus my career on aviation maintenance rather than flight, because I didn’t want to put my family through a pilot’s week-long absences. Working in the shop meant I could come home every night and be there for my wife and kids. That matters to me.”

Duncan Aviation attracted him for a few reasons. “First, there was the money,” Prater says. “It was better than what a private college could offer, and with a growing family, I needed that. Second, I liked Duncan Aviation as a company. I liked the fact that it was family-owned, that it was a reasonable size, and that they promote from within. At this point in my life I was thinking about my career over the long haul, and Duncan just made sense.”

Duncan’s Origins in Omaha
Duncan Aviation’s history started in 1956, when Donald Duncan purchased a minority stake in
Lang Aviation in Omaha, Nebraska. A few years later, Duncan bought the rest of the shares and renamed the company “Duncan Beechcraft”. Eventually the company opened a facility in Lincoln, selling the Omaha shop to the Strategic Air Command.

Today, Duncan Aviation is headed by Duncan’s grandson, Todd Duncan. The company has a 440,000 square foot facility in Lincoln, a 325,000 square foot facility in Battle Creek, Michigan, and a 15,000 square foot maintenance hangar in Provo, Utah. The company also operates more than 20 satellite avionics and eight Rapid Response locations in the U.S.

About 2,000 people work for Duncan Aviation. The Lincoln facility where Prater works offers factory-authorized service on Bombardier Challengers (300 and 600 series) and Learjets; Cessna Citation (500/550/560/650/680 models); all models of Dassault Falcon jets; Embraer Legacys and Phenos (100 and 300); and all Hawker jets. Duncan also performs sales and service for Gulfstream and Astra/Westwind aircraft, plus selected engines made by General Electric, Honeywell, Pratt & Whitney, and Williams Rolls Royce.

“Our company is organized around specialties,” says James Prater. “For instance, I run the 170-person airframe department, while engines are handled by someone else. Within my department, I have teams of people who focus on specific aircraft and particular systems. The idea is that when someone hires us to work on their Falcon, the work will be done by professionals who spend 85-90 percent of their time working on this specific aircraft make. This builds expertise and familiarity with the technology, and provides our customers with a better product.”

Duncan Aviation also speeds up the MRO process by making sure that certain people are dedicated to supplying the right tools and parts to the A&Ps on the floor.

“Rather than walking half a mile to get a component, an A&P can just order it electronically and have it delivered to them,” Prater says. “This saves us time, which saves the customer money. It also improves inventory management, since part and tool distribution is centrally controlled.”
Rising Up The Ranks
James Prater has worked up to where he is today, rising from a Level 2 mechanic to a Level 3, then serving as the shop’s maintenance scheduler and assistant manager. He became airframe in 2006. Because of this career arc, he has developed a well-informed view not only of what goes on at Duncan, but the best ways to get it done.

“My philosophy of management is to take care of the people you have — educate and develop them — and in turn they will take care of the business for you,” he says. “As well, I am a big believer in ‘leadership by walking around’. I am out on the shop floor as much as possible, seeing what is being done and doing what I can to direct, advise and help my people. I also try to get to know them personally, and express my appreciation for all the things they do right. This matters to employees; I know that it always mattered to me.”

That said, Prater is keenly aware that he is now a manager, not a mechanic. “Being in an office means you lose a bit of the knack you had for getting things fixed,” he observes. “This is why my people are so important to me. They are now the front line of our expertise. I’m here to deploy their knowledge, but they are the ones who make the difference.”

Looking ahead, Prater’s ambition is to keep moving up the corporate ladder at Duncan Aviation. “I’d like to go into senior management,” he confides. “I think with my experience and my ability to bridge the mechanic/management gap, I could bring some real benefits to this company.”

He also wants to enhance Duncan’s efforts in balancing the customer’s desire for the fastest, most inexpensive repairs with the company’s standards of safety and reliability. “It is possible to do things better without compromising standards — having parts and tools delivered to the work site is one such solution,” he says. “But there are other solutions still waiting to be discovered that can advance this balance further, and I want to be a part of finding them.”

Meanwhile, he remains a well-rounded person with passions outside of aviation. “I’d also like to spend some more time on my drums,” he says. “I really enjoy playing in church, especially because my daughter — who plays viola and percussion — is now up there with me. Christian rock ’n’ roll is great stuff. And if I can work in a few Metallica riffs into Sunday morning, so much the better!”

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