



***Sun-n-Fun 2022, Part 2:
Love Was
in the Air***

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By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: April 2022

Full disclosure: I am not a professional wedding photographer. In fact, I'm not a professional anything. But when dear friends like Robyn Olson and Kevin Bachand make a request and you're the last one standing with a decent single-lens reflex, you put on your big-boy pants and get it done. Like the first time you landed in a strong crosswind. Or, as Chef Emeril Lagasse would say as he dumps a pile of chili peppers into your dinner, "Let's kick it up a notch!"

You first met Robyn and Kevin while they were camping at the amiable Triple Tree fly-in in South Carolina (see the November 2019 edition of this newspaper). They were flying a beautifully-maintained 1959 Piper Tri-Pacer which meant their camp by the Enoree River was comfortable but spartan, the whole weight-and-balance thing being such as it is.

Then COVID arrived. Those were frantic days: the fear, the loneliness, the losses, and refrigerated trucks outside overwhelmed hospitals. Planes stayed in their hangars. The sun never shined. The whole world held its breath.

But the calendar does not stand still. Fast-forward to September 2021. Vaccines arrived, COVID retreated, and Triple Tree was back in business. As I wandered the campgrounds I was pleased to come across a handsome Cessna Centurion. News-flash: this proud bird was the upgraded ride of Robyn and

Kevin. They were “flying the wings off” their new plane and greatly appreciating its speed, long legs and load-hauling capacity, especially in comparison to the diminutive Piper.



A perfectly normal afternoon at Sun-n-Fun, except this is the day before the big wedding. Left to right: your humble reporter, Robyn soon-to-be Bachand, Kevin Bachand, Pedro Freire, Borko Novakovic and Gary Rogerson.

Their other news-flash was a real surprise: they were planning their wedding, and it was going to be the following spring at the Sun-n-Fun airshow in Lakeland, FL. Happily, they invited me and about 250,000 of their closest friends to attend.

I'm a sucker for a good wedding. "I'll be there," I pledged romantically, a tear in my eye.

Romance in Slow Gear

Robyn and Kevin live in northern Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC. Raised in the historic seafaring corner of southeastern Connecticut, Kevin is sustaining that globe-hopping tradition of adventure as a highly accomplished aviator who flogs a Gulfstream around the world for a large corporation. In earlier times, “I flew Learjets and Citations for Part 135 operators, and way back I did charter in a variety of piston singles and twins,” he told me.

Robyn was raised in Virginia and today works as both a nurse specializing in pediatrics and as a private flight attendant. Of such professionalism is her performance that she is able to pick and choose her trips; she only flies for people she likes.

Kevin and Robyn’s relationship began slowly and inauspiciously sometime in 2015 when they worked together on a couple of flights. She was impressed but not swept off her feet. Oddly, Kevin had the same positive but remote reaction. Very cool, these two.

Now it was Cupid’s turn to kick it up a notch, but it took a while for the stars to align. In May 2016, they were working together on a flight to Madrid. As captain, Kevin invited the entire crew to go dine together, “team building” and all that. Between one thing and another only Robyn accepted the offer. The key element that caught her attention was that Kevin had mentioned his chosen restaurant featured flamingos. Having never seen flamingos outside of the National Geographic, she figured it was a better offer than a luke-warm pizza from room service at their hotel.

The well-traveled readers of this journal no doubt will connect the dots faster than my keyboard: Robyn was both surprised and delighted when the restaurant featured flamenco, not tall pink birds standing on one leg. But as they enjoyed the floorshow an untoward circumstance ruined the evening.

Quite unexpectedly, Robyn became very ill, a bit wobbly, and very uncomfortable.

It could have been a 24-hour bug, or perhaps something in the food, but to this day Kevin suspects someone slipped a drug into her drink. “We are not sure what happened, especially because it happened so quickly,” Kevin remembers, “but no matter what the cause, I thought she would feel better outside of the bar.”



Tim Kirby (under the hood) from Coconut Flyers made a special contribution to the festivities with a loan of this charming Nash automobile from the 1950s. In the tradition of all good weddings, something had to go wrong, and in this case the car — which had been running perfectly — refused to start. A dozen burly partiers pushed it until the engine caught, and Kevin was able to make his entrance in style.

Kevin quickly removed her into the cool, fresh air of the city night. He searched fruitlessly for a taxi until Robyn firmly declared they could, should and would walk back to their hotel. Kevin suggested this was unwise but Robyn

was adamant, so walk they did. Three long miles, on rough Madrid sidewalks, in the middle of the night, wearing high heels.

As they relate the story, Robyn was frank about her motivations. “I wanted to walk because I needed fresh air,” she said confidently. “But I also wanted time to get to know him better.” Not an easy time and place for a job interview, it seems to this reporter, and doubly-hard when you’re trying to walk-off a drug-induced haze.

By the time they made it back to their hotel they both were wiped out. But Robyn remembers every step of the way, “especially the moment when I asked if I could put my arm around her,” Kevin admits with a grin.

Kevin managed to get her back to her hotel room and safely deposited her on her bed, removing those murderous shoes and making sure she was on the mend. A chivalrous and noble Sir Galahad, is our Kevin.

The next morning, he was tranquilly enjoying his breakfast in the hotel. Robyn walked into the restaurant, fire in her eyes. Kevin doesn’t remember exactly what she said, but it was something akin to “You left your jacket in my room, you chump!” Happily, before Robyn had even finished her toast Kevin had persuaded her of his integrity. The return flight to America was full of promise. “I’ll call you,” Kevin assured her.

But he didn’t, because nature wasn’t finished throwing wrenches into the gears of this romance. Back in Virginia, they were trading increasingly cordial phone calls but Kevin pugnaciously refused to schedule a “real” date with Robyn. Although he didn’t tell her, he had developed a cold-sore the size of Wyoming.

Remembering the old adage “you only get one chance to make a great first impression?” Kevin wanted to start this relationship off on the best possible circumstances and a cold-sore didn’t fit the bill. This resulted in a string of

strained, off-putting excuses, along the line of “I’d love to see you but I’m washing the dog this evening.” Robyn finally challenged him, and he confessed to his condition.

“I’m a damn nurse and seen a lot worse,” she reminded him. “Meet me at Starbucks in twenty minutes. No excuses.” As any wise man would do, he followed her instructions. He was hugely relieved when she announced, rather clinically, it wasn’t bad and she thought it was cute he was so concerned.

Cupid, victorious but exhausted, put down his quiver and went out for a beer with the guys.

Sun-n-Fun Plans

Fast-forward to 2022. President and CEO John “Lites” Leenhouts was just retiring after serving at the helm of Sun-n-Fun for eleven years. A long-time Navy carrier pilot and commander who flew A-7, F-14 and F-18 jets, “Lites” has deep experience managing complex organizations.

It’s no secret that for many years Sun-n-Fun was on fiscal life-support, barely able to limp from one calendar to the next. Under his leadership, Leenhouts refocused the team on their mission, revamped its finances and rebuilt the organizational culture.

The results speak clearly of his managerial prowess: Sun-n-Fun itself is now the world’s second largest general aviation airshow. It has the financial chops to make improvements in the Sun-n-Fun campus. The event also funds three important institutions: the aviation-based STEM high school at Lakeland Airport (called the Aerospace Center for Excellence), the world’s largest flying club for high school aged kids, and a stunning aviation museum. Little known fact: Sun-n-Fun is the number one provider of aviation scholarships in the United States. Most of the credit for these accomplishments goes to Leenhouts.

One of Leenhouts' more far-fetched ideas was to encourage the dreams of the gregarious twosome of Tim and Paige Kirby. For years, the Kirbys had operated an untraditional Vintage campsite bar called "Coconut Flyers." Their business model was simple but untraditional: free beer for all, funded completely by donations. About a decade ago, Lites asked the Kirbys to make Coconut Flyers more permanent and prominent, and dedicated to them a prime location in Vintage Camping abutting the flight line.

Since then, Coconut Flyers has grown from "a couple of tents, a keg of beer and a garbage can" to a full-throttle permanent party, with free beer, light dinners and live music, snuggled between some of the most handsome Stearman restorations you'll ever see. It also has been the Sun-n-Fun home-away-from home for Robyn and Kevin.

"Year after year, I always met Robyn at the show, and we talked," Paige told me. "Last year she told me she was engaged, which was exciting. Then a couple of weeks later, she emailed me to ask if Coconut Flyers could host their wedding. Of course, we said yes!"

At which point, Tim called Leenhouts and told him about these plans. "He immediately said he'd officiate, like the captain of a ship." Tim explained.

SNF Camping

Robyn and Kevin arrived in their Centurion early in show week and parked their bird in Vintage Camping close to Coconut Flyers. As befitting almost-newly-weds — and in sharp contrast to their days of Piper camping — they came fully equipped. They had a tent only slightly smaller than the Taj Mahal with a queen bed inside it. They had half a dozen folding chairs, a gas grill for cooking, a Yeti which could actually hold an entire yeti, tons of beer and snacks, and all the fixings which accompany a wedding dress. They even had a love-seat in their tent. Who camps with a couch?

With their long list of flying friends, their campsite was busy as everybody visited to wish them well. Several of Kevin's company colleagues stopped by to sample their beer and pillage their hors d'oeuvres. Numerous friends from their Piper, Cessna and Vintage connections, including this correspondent, wolfed



Robyn arrived on the JetMobile, piloted by retired Delta captain Paul Holmes. The JetMobile is an engine nacelle from a Boeing 747 and towers eleven feet over the ramp. The whole device rides on a six-wheel undercarriage, and as it trundles down a taxiway it looks something like a golf cart on steroids, spewing soap bubbles instead of jet exhaust.

down the cheese and crackers. They ran out of cooking gas until other Centurion campers — Paul and Julie Parks, profiled in last month's magazine — brought them a replacement tank from their own supplies. We sat in the shade of the Centurion's sturdy wings drinking their beer and watched the afternoon airshows without the hassle of walking to the flight line. It was practically perfect.

Interestingly, their non-flying family did not attend. “We didn’t specifically tell anyone not to come, we just didn’t invite anyone,” Kevin explained. “Either you are going to be at Sun-n-Fun or you’re not, and we really didn’t need any stress from people trying to get there from out-of-town.”

While surprising when compared to more traditional nuptials, their decision made wonderful sense to those of us gathered for the event. First, it certainly would have been difficult for non-flyers to get to Sun-n-Fun. They would have had to bring their own camping supplies and they would have been parked in distant campgrounds away from Vintage Camping. Lastly, concerns over their guests’ well-being would have been a distraction for Robyn and Kevin instead of an enhancement to the event. Smart people.

Robyn agreed. “Non-aviation people just wouldn’t get the Sun-n-Fun thing,” she assured me.

My almost-sainted wife, thoughtful as always, even had provided me with a wedding gift which was gratefully and gracefully accepted. Except for the deluge on Thursday afternoon, it was a magical week. We all were excited about the plans for Friday evening.

The Nash and the JetMobile

As the big day arrived, we could see a mixture of fatigue and stress on the shoulders of our two friends. As casual as Sun-n-Fun might be, a wedding is still a big deal. There’s always pressure, and a little “girl time” helps sooth the frazzled nerves.

Kevin primped for the festivities by putting on a clean shirt; hey, it’s Sun-n-Fun! In fact, his sartorial selection was a white-and-pink Hawaiian shirt featuring flamingos, a throw-back to that first ill-fated dinner in Madrid.

Robyn prepared for the ceremony in Tim and Paige’s small recreational vehicle.

“As Robyn was getting dressed for the wedding, I offered her a shot of tequila,” Paige told me. “She and I and my four girlfriends, we all shared a couple shots and a couple of laughs. Robyn said that was the most special thing anybody could have done for her. It made her feel like a real bride.”

The event was timed for the end of the airshow; as much as we all love airplanes, nobody wants the Thunderbirds at a wedding. The sun was low in the afternoon sky as Kevin arrived in Tim Kirby’s baby-blue Nash from the 1950s; it was a “last-second addition” from the thoughtful Coconut Flyer team. In classic wedding style, the antique refused to start so a handful of burly neighbors pushed it down the taxiway as Tim popped the clutch. The little engine purred to life and they drove through the displays, waving at the happy throng.

Once Kevin had arrived, Robyn made her entrance high atop the eye-popping JetMobile, piloted by retired Delta captain Paul Holmes. She waved at the crowds like the Queen of England as she rolled through the Warbird display atop her eleven-foot high perch. Robyn’s elegant wedding gown billowed in the breeze as soap bubbles floated from the exhaust of the giant machine.

Leenhouts was waiting for the happy couple as they joined hands and walked across the grass at Coconut Flyers. Tim Kirby’s bright yellow Stearman served as the backdrop. The scattered clouds of the afternoon drifted away and everybody swirled around the couple in warm golden twilight. Even tourists and visitors just walking by, stopped to listen and cherish the moment.

With an aeronautical twist, Leenhouts officiated with gentle humor. “Robyn, do you promise to love and honor Kevin, even when he bounces the landings?” was one memorable pledge. The couple offered their own deeply personal vows of affection and respect, which for the sake of their privacy will not be repeated here but made us all catch our throats. Finally, Leenhouts announced they were husband and wife, they enjoyed a perfect kiss, and the party began.

The reception checked all the normal wedding reception boxes, but with a casual and comfortable Coconut Flyers twist. The couple did a victory lap in the JetMobile, Robyn's wedding gown and Kevin's huge smile explaining the surprise to the uninformed. The volunteer musicians were perfect. Kevin gave a gentle thank-you speech; there was champagne and a wedding cake and all the usual fixings. The bridal party was traditional: the maid-of-honor was Paige Kirby, and Kevin's best man was Dana Messier. "Their signatures are on our marriage certificate," Kevin told me proudly.

As the sun settled and the chilly night took hold, everyone bundled up against the damp. Music and laughter flowed across Vintage camping and, riding on the breeze, gently tumbled and swirled around the looming warbirds across the ramp. Stars twinkled and the moon rose; far aloft commercial flights slit the night sky with red and green strobes marking their progress as Kevin and Robyn began their own journey.



Sun-n-Fun President and CEO John "Lites" Leenhouts was retiring after serving at the helm of the airshow for eleven years. Officiating at Robyn and Kevin's wedding was his last official event. He has a very gentle manner and a wickedly-sharp sense of humor, so the ceremony was full of life and laughter.

As always at Coconut Flyers, at 10:15 the Kirby's flicked the lights, signaling it was time to call it a night. Without a gentle murmur, everybody retired as good neighbors do, leaving the night to the newly-weds and the midnight jets of Amazon Prime.



About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

