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THE MAN WHO THINKS HE CAN CHANGE SALES

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Jim Kaiser,
CEO of J-Curve
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All Out Nightmare

STORY BY DEAN MEADORS



**CRYSTAL POWELL'S FLIGHT BUSINESS WAS JUST LIFTING OFF WHEN THE UNTHINKABLE HAPPENED—
A HELICOPTER CRASH OVER NORTH SCOTTSDALE KILLED TWO PEOPLE AND DEALT THE FLEDGLING COMPANY
A SEVERE BLOW.**

WHEN CRYSTAL POWELL DECIDED

in 2004 to apply her ambition and savings account to starting a helicopter charter service for aerial photography and tours, she saw a bright future.

However, within the early stages of her first business, her company weathered a crisis that taught her valuable lessons about survival.

But when starting out, Powell, 34, showed up at Scottsdale's Universal Helicopters to begin flight training, her instructor was less than pleased to see the young woman in class.

"This isn't flower arranging," he grumbled.

Powell was the only woman in class, but her decision to launch a career in helicopters wasn't as rash as it might have appeared. After 10 years of helping establish antenna sites for the wireless communications industry, the Salt Lake City native had logged lots of passenger hours flying to rugged, remote hilltops.

Then came the World Trade Center attacks, and business ground to a halt. "I decided I could stay and beg for scraps," she says, "or take what I'd saved and buy a second career.

The eight-time marathoner smiles. "A girl's gotta eat," she says, "and shoes don't buy themselves."

So the tough, charismatic Powell set her sights on helicopters, not flower arranging, because she believed in the business potential of the versatile air ships. (Fixed-wing aircraft are called planes, helicopters are ships.)

She quickly came face-to-face with the hard realities and costs of an aviation business. Flight instruction cost \$80,000, and a no-frills, two-seater ship was another \$160,000. Then came insurance, hangar space, fuel, pilots, federally mandated maintenance schedules, office space, marketing and more. Most costs were anticipated, but nothing in aviation comes cheap.

THE FIVE STRIKES

Powell explains why flying is such a tough business. "It's capital intensive, government regulated, high risk, high liability, and high insurance," she says. She calls these factors the five strikes.

Particularly troublesome are the endless regulations that govern aviation companies. "We're more regulated than nuclear waste," the

Scottsdale resident says.

And there's always the safety issue. "Anytime you're in a helicopter, there's an opportunity for something to go wrong," she says. "They do not glide."

But Powell believed strongly in the opportunity. "Millions of people come here for business or pleasure each year," she says, "and not all of them play golf. There's a need for something new and different."

In only her second year, the concept was proving sound. Despite the challenges and restrictions, All Out Aerial was steadily finding its way to success.

Sightseeing flights of 15, 30 or 60 minutes started at \$99. Sunset Dinner flights were \$750 per couple, and seasonal promotions built around holidays like Valentine's Day were paying off. All Out Aerial wasn't profitable—but it was gaining reputation and moving in the right direction.

THEN, THE CATASTROPHE

On Feb. 22, pilot Carl Smith was giving Sandra Daley her first



CRYSTAL POWELL
OWNER AND CEO OF
ALL OUT AERIAL

PHOTO BY WES JOHNSON

helicopter ride, a gift from her boyfriend. Suddenly, the Robinson R-22 lost power and plunged into a residential area in north Scottsdale, narrowly missing two homes.

No one on the ground was injured, but Smith, 39, a seasoned pilot with 1,200 hours flying helicopters, and Daley, a 43-year-old flight attendant and single mother, were killed.

'I'M SORRY'

In a hangar at Scottsdale Airport,

former pilot Micael Olsson of All Out Aerial was monitoring radio transmissions and heard a ship had crashed with no survivors. Fearful it was Smith, he called the Scottsdale Airport control tower and identified himself. The controller said simply, "I'm sorry."

Powell was attending a business luncheon at the time and initially ignored the ringing phone. Then, noticing the calls were from Olsson, she answered.

She listened to the news, stunned,

then slumped to the floor.

By the following morning, investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board had arrived and joined Scottsdale police and FAA officials in the investigation. Powell was kept busy gathering records, answering media calls and dealing with friends, family, and investigators.

"I was in shock," she says, "but in a calm way." Not knowing what to say, she made few personal calls.

The day after the crash, Powell made an emotional visit to the scene. The violence of the crash was apparent. She couldn't help thinking that the weekend before, Powell herself had been at the controls of the ship now scattered over the ground.

"I was never naive enough to think an accident couldn't happen," she says. "But I hoped it wouldn't be so soon, and I hoped it wouldn't be so tragic."

STANDING STRONG

So far, no official findings have been made beyond the fact that the engine failed. "The ship was less than 20 days out of its annual inspection, the pilot was current, and the weather was perfect. The only thing we could have done differently was not fly."

For the following month, Powell remained in disaster-recovery mode. "My purpose was to stand strong and get my company through this," she says. But by April, the urgency and adrenaline had faded, and Powell experienced a letdown.

"I didn't want to talk to anyone, and I didn't know what to do or say," she says. "You start asking yourself if this business was a good idea, or was it selfish? Am I supposed to learn something from this? Is this a sign I should quit?"

It was clear All Out Aerial had taken a severe hit. The tour business declined, but demand for video and photography demand held up. As the accident fades further from public consciousness, Powell expects the tour business to recover as well.

Sadder but wiser, Crystal Powell is recovering too. She remains hard at work, putting the pieces back together.

"I started something and I want it to work," she says. "But I'm ready for some better days."

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Crystal Powell didn't have an organized, planned strategy for dealing with a disaster, but that doesn't make her unusual.

"In general, entrepreneurs are not very good about planning for a crisis," says Scott Hanson, president of HMA Public Relations. Hanson says it is common for many business owners to think little can happen to their business.

Not so, says Hanson. A crisis can happen to any company. It may be an accident with fatalities, the theft of customer information, a robbery/shooting, or any one of many calamities.

Should you ever have the news media clamoring at your door, Hanson offers these suggestions.

1. HAVE A PLAN IN PLACE FOR DEALING WITH A CRISIS BEFORE IT HAPPENS.

"Preparing in advance is the key," he says. "Think ahead about the things that might effect the survival of your business."

2. GET MEDIA TRAINING.

Specialized firms, including Hanson's, offer useful training on how to manage an inquisitive news media. In a crisis, knowing how to handle yourself in front of a microphone could make a huge difference.

3. BE ACCESSIBLE TO THE MEDIA.

Don't hide in an alley, but always stick to the question you're asked. "Don't go off on a tangent," he says.

4. BE HONEST, BUT NEVER SPECULATE TO A REPORTER.

If you don't know the answer, say so. Never say "no comment," which inevitably sounds like you're hiding something.

5. FINALLY, REMEMBER THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS "OFF THE RECORD."

Regardless of what you've seen in movies, "anything and everything you say in the presence of the media is fair game," says Hanson.



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