

New FireFly owner, business executive new to sport, plans sales incentives, praises staff

By Bill Armstrong

Chris Dawson knew what he was buying when he made an offer for FireFly Balloons. He knew that he and his wife Jean were acquiring one of the premier sport balloon brands in the world – even though he admits that he knew virtually nothing about hot air ballooning.

He knew that he was acquiring the company founded by Tracy Barnes –with whom he had met during his due diligence discussions. He knew that Barnes' company had prospered over the years under several different names and owners, most recently under Sidney and Elenor Conn.

He knew that he was acquiring an experienced workforce, many of whom had been in place for many years, who knew their product and knew the company's customers.

Chris and Jean Dawson may be new to ballooning – but they are not new to running companies. In their first interview since the transaction closed on June 24, Dawson described his background and his reasons for wanting to purchase the revered brand, what he plans to do with the company in the period ahead, and what changes he has already implemented.

The Dawsons are both in their early 40's. Jean is a nurse at Carolinas Medical Center and will also work at FireFly. They have three sons: Christopher, 20, a sophomore at the University of Central Florida; Nicholas, 18, a freshman at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, and Jeremy, 16, a sophomore in high school.

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Chris Dawson

Dawson made his money in the automotive exhaust industry in sales, marketing and distribution. He worked for Tenneco Automotive, and then later bought the distribution center he was managing. At the time he sold that division, it was the largest automotive exhaust dealership in the Southeast. After having spent 20 years in Florida, the family decided to relocate. They picked Mooresville, North Carolina, to search for new business ventures.



Chris and Jean Dawson

“While looking at various companies, I had the opportunity to look at FireFly Balloons. Although this was quite a change from automotive exhaust, this company greatly piqued my interest. The two key factors in my decision to buy FireFly Balloons were the incredible staff and the quality of the product,” he said.

“We had learned that the company was for sale about eight months ago,” Dawson told Balloon Life. “We loved the hand-crafted work, the quality of the work, the fact that the company manufactures all of its components using American made products, and the quality of the staff

“We were intrigued by what we saw from the balloon side. Looking at the company and its potential, and understanding quality of dealer networks, we knew we could lend a hand from our past business standpoint,” he added.

“Our background in managing business will help us managing this successfully. We want to become a big part of the ballooning community. We want to build a connection with our dealers, a family type partnership, that creates a team atmosphere.”

“The staff of FireFly Balloons is incredibly dedicated to what they do. They go out of their way to make sure we deliver the highest quality product. They want the customers to be as proud of the Firefly products as we are.

“We feel the product is outstanding. The redundancy in all safety features, the quality of the hand workmanship, the life expectancy of the polyester envelopes and sheen of the colors are just a few features that make FireFly Balloons a pleasure to own.

“Our goal for customer service will be to continue to strive for complete customer satisfaction. This goal would be for not only envelopes, but in replacement parts, accessories and everything else we do.

FireFly has pioneered some of the sport's most important engineering, safety, aesthetic and marketing innovations

Dawson said they plan to reach out to customers and prospects.

“Jean and I look forward to becoming a part of the ballooning community. To have a company like FireFly Balloons — one that can also be a passion, not just a business — is a great bonus to buying a company. To be part of the social activities, the rallies and the whole ballooning community is a very exciting opportunity for us. We are proud of the history of FireFly Balloons.”

The company's manufacturing facility was first approved by the FAA Southern Region in November 1974. FireFly currently manufactures eight different models of balloons under the FAA Type Certificate A14S0 issued on February 2, 1974. The factory is supported by a network of authorized dealers and repair stations located from Germany to Japan.

Since its inception, the company has pioneered some of the most important engineering, safety, aesthetic and marketing innovations in the modern history of the sport.

Those innovations include the distinctive triangular carriage; the parachute valve, now in use by all manufacturers; the first fully redundant burner, the T3-017; the new Mirage burner, the most powerful burner in the world at 43 million BTU, and FlexNet envelope construction, the industry's first modularized construction technique, and nonconductive suspension cables.

Dawson said that he and Jean will rely on the FireFly staff to keep up the product — and that Sidney and Elenor Conn will serve as consultants to the new owners.

The first thing Dawson did was to bring in a new national sales manager, Jack Ponticelli. Together, they have pledged to involve the sales force in creative new sales approaches and product innovations.

Ponticelli has been involved in ballooning for more than 25 years. He has been a FireFly dealer for the past 12, and moved to North Carolina about a year ago, from New Jersey.

With a 30-year background in aviation as a crew chief, aircraft mechanic, aircraft inspector, and purchaser of aircraft/space shuttle components for the federal government and a commercial balloon pilot, Ponticelli became involved with balloons more than 20 years ago when he attended a balloon festival in Lake George, NY.

“I have been hooked ever since,” he says.

He moved his family to Hunterdon County, one of the last rural areas of New Jersey, where he started crewing and flying with a local company. About twelve years ago, he started Avian Adventures Hot Air Balloon Company, offering daily balloon rides and balloon advertising in and around the Clinton, NJ area and became a FireFly Balloon dealer.



Jack Ponticelli, new sales manager

When he moved his family to North Carolina last year, he started a farm and flying just for fun.

“Jack has begun working on a Dealer Development Program that we will put into place,” Dawson said.

Dawson said they will listen to dealers and their suggestions for growing the sport.

“Our goal will be to get our dealers to be part of that growth. We want people to know who our Firefly dealers are.

“We're collecting survey information from dealers. We believe we may be able to implement programs to get more people interested in flying and to stimulate the business.

“The whole staff will remain in place. Little from a product standpoint will change initially,” Dawson said. “We will come out with new items, and we are thinking about accessories to balloons we already have.” Dawson said there are a couple of things on the drawing table he thinks are interesting, some “tremendous ideas from dealers and in-house staff” and some things as simple as a tool kit and first-aid kit that would stay with the gondola.



Weaver Jessie Stoner has been at FireFly Balloons since 1999.

Most FireFly employees are cross-trained and can perform many different roles on any given day, he said.

Some of the staff who have been with the company for a long time include many familiar to Barnes/BalloonWorks/Firefly owners:

Colin McCauley Jr., Graphics Department Head Supervisor, graduated from Western Carolina University in 1998 with a BFA, concentrating in graphic design, and found his home at FireFly in 2002. He makes renderings for balloonists, developing the graphics for artwork on balloons, and manages the FireFly website.



Reggie Stroud, basket supervisor, has worked for FireFly Balloons since 1989 and oversees assembly of all the baskets.

Keith Gantt, Production Manager, has worked for FireFly since 1986, dating back to the Tracy Barnes era of The Balloon Works. Besides making sure production goes as smoothly as possible, Keith is also in charge of the repair station, and he is a general inspector, in addition to a flight test inspector.

Rob Wise, Customer Service Manager, had his first balloon ride in 1991 in a FireFly balloon. He was hired as a purchasing agent in 1999 and then moved up to customer service. Rob has enjoyed learning the business, traveling and meeting all the people associated with the balloon world.

Shawn Fraver, engineer, is one of the newer employees, having started in March of 2005. She holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and two associates degrees in manufacturing engineering technology and mechanical drafting.

Sherry Combs, sewing supervisor, has been with FireFly Balloons longer than any other employee, having started in 1975. She oversees all aspects of the balloon envelope, and is certified in repair and first piece inspection.



Monica South, graphics assistant, has worked at FireFly Balloons since 1994. In addition to holding a repair certification, Monica sews, builds burners, assembles fans, and works in the parts department.

Russ Eastburn has been with FireFly Balloons since 1999 as a member of the sewing team.

Theresa Stacy, who started in 1999, sews gores and panels, and handles cutting and finishing.

Georgina Aleman, sewing, has been with FireFly Balloons for six years, sewing gores, dealing with all parts of the envelope and as part of the cutting team.



Nancy Sneed, sewing, with the company for five years, handles sewing team, cutting and finishing.

Kathy Gregory, graphics supervisor, with FireFly since 1986, "does a little bit of everything" she says, including being certified in repairs and sewing as first piece inspector.

Jimmie Mounts, frame shop, has worked at FireFly since 1990; he also does wood bending, works with rope and does tether inflations.



Gloria Summers, Quality Control Manager, has worked at FireFly since 1978, now serving as senior inspector and Designated Manufacturer Inspection Representative for the FAA.

Muriel Holleman, the bookkeeper since 1983, handles accounts receivable and accounts payable.

Linda Krueger, accountant, with FireFly Balloons since 2001, handles all the certification paperwork on balloons for the FAA as well as exports.