

Two skywriters use the heavens as their pulpit

BY LAURA FIGUEROA

lfigueroa@MiamiHerald.com



CANDACE WEST / FREELANCE

Pilot Keith Poeschl stands in front of the crop dusting plane he uses to write religious messages of encouragement in the sky at Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport.

The messages appear when the sky is clear:

Trust Jesus. God Forgives. U + God = :)

With the heavens as their pulpit, pilots Jerry Stevens and Keith Poeschl deliver their sermon from a bright-yellow crop duster dubbed ``Holy Smoke."

``These are God's love letters to his children," explains Stevens, 68, a retired aviator who started the sky writing mission 12 years ago when living in Boca Raton.

Since then, Stevens has taken Poeschl, 33, under his wing, teaching the novice pilot the art of skywriting. There are now two versions of the Holy Smoke -- one stationed in Fort Lauderdale, the other in Orlando, so the duo may spread religious affirmations from Miami to the Magic Kingdom.

Though their messages, written at 10,000 feet, can be seen 35 miles away on a clear day, both pilots prefer to stay out of the limelight.

“This isn't about us,” says Stevens. “God is the one strategically putting those messages there. . . we're nothing more than the pen.”

The idea for “God's love letters in the sky” came to Stevens after deep prayer.

“I prayed and asked God to use me how he would like,” said Stevens, a retired corporate pilot.

While attending Ascension Catholic Church in Boca Raton one day, he heard a hymn that struck a chord: “And fill the skies with His praises.”

So he started the skywriting ministry.

He wrote his first “U + God = Happy Face” on Thanksgiving Day 1998.

He was once questioned by the FBI, after writing “God is Great” over Palm Beach County in January 2002.

It was just a few months after Anthrax-tainted letters, with the message “Allah is Great,” had been sent to elected officials and the media. It was also just after the Sept. 11 attacks, and several of the terrorists had lived and received their flight training in South Florida.

Soon Stevens found himself venturing outside of South Florida, hovering over Naples or Fort Myers, once taking his message to New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

Once a month he would fly the Holy Smoke to Orlando, to leave messages above the Disney and Universal theme parks.

“They've eradicated God's word from public places, taken Him out of the schools, but He puts his name back out there in biblical proportions,” said Stevens.

After much prayer, Stevens felt as though God was calling him to relocate permanently to Central Florida so he could spend more time there sky writing.

For several years, Stevens was alone in the one-seat Grumman AgCat crop duster, scribbling his messages. But after moving to Orlando two years ago, he felt he needed a successor in South Florida.

He called an aviation school in Georgia, which put him in touch with Poeschl, a recent graduate of the school who hailed from Milwaukee and was searching for a gig.

The two men spoke over the phone and immediately connected. They shared a love of pioussness and planes.

Poeschl had attended bible school for three semesters, before deciding to switch gears and enroll in aviation school.

``What I'm doing now is participating on a mission to save souls," Poeschl said. ``God answered all my prayers."

He now lives in Fort Lauderdale, where he attends Calvary Chapel church and is working on fine tuning his skywriting skills, usually spending more than an hour in the sky two to three times a week.

It's not an easy task maneuvering the Holy Smoke to make the three-quarters of a mile long letters. Each twist and turn at 120 mph must be timed precisely to form each of the letters in white smoke.

``Nothing's too difficult with God's learning curve," Stevens said about his apprentice's work.

The flights are funded in large part by Don Campion, president of Banyan Air Service, who allows the Holy Smoke to stay parked at the company's hanger at Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport. The company also contributes toward the fuel costs, which can get pricey with an average trip requiring 51 gallons of fuel at a cost close to \$290.

Campion -- the type of boss who has a company chaplain on hand for his employees and sponsors projects like the construction of a hospital in Nigeria -- said he has experienced first hand how the messages have changed the lives of other.

He met a man who'd been on the brink of divorcing his wife. But they took a break at their attorney's office, stepped outside and looked up.

``There in the sky they see the words `Jesus Forgives,' " Campion said. ``They took it as a literal sign, and they both said to each other ``why don't we try forgiving each other?' "

A year later the couple is still together, Campion said.

“God put that message strategically there,” Stevens said. “That had nothing to do with me or Keith. Do you think that we knew that at 2 p.m. on such and such date, over this location, this couple was going to be at their attorneys office getting a divorce? What if they would have never stepped out for a break? Those are the things we have no control over.

“That is God piloting the plane.”

Both pilots insist the focus should be on the message, and not on them. Stevens once had a website up, but he took it down, because he did not want to “dilute” the meaning of the messages.

Still, after a weekend of skywriting, it's not uncommon for the pilots to hear from someone who read their message. The receptionists at Banyan often field calls from people who have traced the Holy Smoke's location back to their offices.

“Every time I see their sky writing, I text them ‘you know Miami loves you,’ ” said Rosalinda Mercado of Miami Lakes.

Recently, a friend's 20-year-son was diagnosed with cancer, Mercado said.

“When they first got the news, they were of course devastated,” Mercado recounted. “The very next day, the father was outside and looks up at in the sky and sees ‘Jesus Loves You.’ The guy just broke down crying. For that moment he felt some comfort. These are small messages, but there's nothing small about what they do.”

But it hasn't been all positive feed back for the skywriters. In previous years, Stevens has received complaints from people who argue he is trying to force his religious views upon people.

“Jesus loves them, too,” Stevens says about his critics.