

A Thunderstorm called Mr. Chance

While looking north towards the Columbia River, a jet was screaming for its turn on the the runway. I waited for silence before urging Gary to commit to spilling his life story as a “Deltoid” (loyal Delta employee). One of his dreams of becoming a pilot and taking lessons led him to spend a generous amount of time at the airport which then influenced his decision to work for Delta Airlines. He remarks, “It will be nearly twelve years this January.” His memory reaches back and wonders where all the time has gone. One of his childhood dreams of becoming a pilot was lost in the clouds.

His journey started as a part-time ramp agent at the Jackson, Wyoming airport with the daily pleasure of viewing the Grand Tetons wrap their majestic beauty around the airport. He recalls with fond memories that the Yellowstone National Park and Jackson Hole Ski Resort were nearby which allowed for some serious outdoor playing time.

However, he understood that to move up the ladder in the airline industry would mean making several schedule changes and uprooting his home several times. This led him to continue the journey to Boston, Massachusetts and then Portland, Oregon. He has had the experience of working in different departments in various cities and the opportunity of meeting some very distinct individuals. For example, while he worked in Boston, the Italian culture of several fellow employees displayed a devotion to their family and would never think of leaving the area. “In Boston it seemed like all the Delta people were local. They were very family-oriented, unlike here in Portland where we have various backgrounds and have transferred a number of times.”

The many departments he has worked include Cabin Service, the entry-level position where the employees were responsible to clean and stock the aircraft between flight times, took many years of his life with Delta. He painfully put in his time and waited his turn to be promoted to a Customer Service Agent. He has also attempted the stress-filled Ticket Counter position, which can be full of endless demands from hard-to-please passengers. Currently he works as a Ramp Agent, where the job can be physically demanding and forces him to endure every type of weather condition. He is responsible for bringing the aircraft safely into the gate area and unloading the numerous back-breaking pounds of bags, mail and freight. As a Customer Service Agent, he can easily transfer back and forth between the counter and ramp as often as the season changes. “I like working outside because it’s low stress and I feel as if I have accomplished something. Unlike working on the Ticket Counter I was one on one with a passenger, but it seemed never-ending.”

In spite of the sacrifices, Delta employees keep hanging in year after year as if attached to an invisible umbilical cord that gives them security and comfort. Delta Airlines takes care of their employees by handing out a complete benefits package, but it's the free flight benefits that the employees become addicted to and ultimately keeps Delta from having a high employee turnover. Gary has traveled to Maui, Hawaii, Orlando, Florida, Hilton Head, South Carolina and Edmonton, Canada to name a few destinations. "I haven't traveled overseas yet but someday I would like to take my daughter."

Finally, he feels that he has a smooth and turbulent-free route with his life and company. He doesn't foresee any future transfers or downsizing in his future with the company. During our evening break and after the sun had set, I inquired about his future goals, he said with a sigh of resignation, "This is my career. For a person that didn't complete college, job opportunities are pretty limited. I don't plan on starting over at my age." He plans on a retirement with Delta but hopes a job opportunity within the company will catch his attention because he doesn't see himself still working on the ramp in his 50's or 60's. Due to the unwanted stress that goes hand-in-hand with a management position, he has no desire to move into that territory. He is unsure which direction he will head or even fly. He's just waiting for a thunderstorm called Mr. Chance.

With the intention of being a pilot of his own journey, Gary has been thrown off course by unexpected storms called "responsibility" and "practicality". The expectations of providing for his family have shifted him further and further from his original flight plan. He has settled back into coach and has surrendered the controls. He set out trying to fulfill a childhood dream but it still remains just that. Is it that important to play out childhood dreams? Maybe not since they are conjured up with a naïve and innocent mind that is unknowing of the future to come.