

A View from the Top



From high above in the cramped cockpit of a single-prop airplane, a crop duster may have seen a young, blue-eyed boy chasing after him among the rows of growing cotton. As the boy grew older, his fascination of airplanes and his dreams of becoming an aviator never left him. Now, years later, he has fulfilled his dream of earning his commercial pilot's license, but he is not simply flying these days. He is providing a new perspective often without leaving the ground.

Kris Barton is the owner and sole pilot of Swing Wing Productions, a low-altitude aerial video and photography company that captures high-definition photographs and videos through remote control (RC), multi-rotor helicopters for a variety of clients and purposes.

While the idea of Swing Wing was conceived less than two years ago, Kris and his helicopters have taken off. From golf courses and schools to real estate and oilrigs, the company is growing and has already completed work in 44 states.

"We basically found a market where, because

our costs are a fraction of the full-scale helicopter," he said, "we are able to bring in a lot of markets that would never, ever be able to take advantage of aerial video or photography."

Kris, who began flying remote-control airplanes at age 10, said he initially knew there was a market for his product from being involved with full-scale aerial photography and knowing what people were willing to pay to capture their desired images.

However, he said some are still shocked by the results of his work because they do not fully

understand the service he provides.

"When I tell people I do aerial video and photography from RC helicopters," Kris said,

"they picture someone with their cellphone strapped to a helicopter like the guy has in the mall."

The images he captures with a high-definition camera mounted to an eight-rotor helicopter leave his customers nothing less than amazed and shocked. Perhaps because no aerial video or photographs they have seen compares.

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While cost is the number one benefit of using a remote-control aerial vehicle, Kris said, the capabilities are unparalleled. While Swing Wing Productions is able to rent and operate a full-scale helicopter if needed, its remote control aircrafts are able to capture images much richer in detail.

Kris' remote controlled helicopters are limited to flying 400 feet and below, he said, while helicopters are restricted to operation 1,000 feet and above.

"It takes a very impressive photographer to get that great shot from 1,000 feet," he said. "At 400 feet and below, 95 percent of the things we're asked to do, we're going to be able to get a better shot."

Jay Norton, owner of Norton Energy Drilling and one of Swing Wing Production's clients, said he thinks the photographs Kris is able to capture tell a much more interesting story of the oil and gas industry.

"There aren't that many aerial photographs," he said. "It gives you a different perspective. I think a better perspective quite frankly."

Norton, who contracted Kris to photograph the company's drilling rigs for promotional materials, said he would not have considered aerial photography if it were not for the services Swing Wing Productions provides. Norton said he is impressed with the quality of images, which he described as having a unique perspective with a three-dimensional sense.

Kris said that is his goal. To deliver a unique product to clients that is beneficial for their needs, no matter the market.

With a recent move back to Lubbock, Swing Wing Production's market has changed, but for the better. While the company is based in Austin, Texas, Kris and his wife, Missi, chose to move to Lubbock, which they consider home. With an air of excitement and a glint in his eye, Kris said Lubbock is a place where he wants to do business and, though there are many beautiful photography and video chances in Austin, the opportunities are in West Texas.

That is where agriculture steps in.

Growing up on a cotton farm and being immersed in a family history in cotton ginning, Kris is familiar with agriculture and the dedicated people of the industry. Swing Wing Productions is continuously working with local agriculturalists to discover the potential benefits of aerial photography and video in this area.

"Anything we do in West Texas is going to have some type of agriculture in the shot," Kris said. "I don't think you can take this helicopter in the air and take a picture, no matter which direction you point it, and it's not going to have some cotton, or wheat, or some type of agriculture in the shot."

Stephan Maas, a professor of agricultural



photograph provided by Swing Wing Productions




photograph provided by Swing Wing Productions



When Kris proposed the idea of Swing Wing Productions to Missi, she said he had the customer in mind. He saw an opportunity to bring a different angle to the things we see on a daily basis and create a unique product, at a better price, for his clients. He truly wants to help, she said, and will not put a hard sell on those who would not benefit from his service.

“He’s just so personable and believes in his customers.” Missi said. “He believes in what he’s doing, and he’s proud of his product.”

When it comes to the end result, Missi said clients tend to be overcome with a child-like awe. In a world where we tend to believe we have done and seen it all, Kris is providing a new outlook to the familiar. However, Missi said she believes Kris is simply sharing the perspective he has had all these years. He has spent most of his life in the air, she said, and she wonders if the notion of Swing Wing Productions has been there all along.

“He’s always just kind of had a bird’s eye view, so I think that idea was born a long time before it actually came to fruition,” she said. “Just because he got to see the world in a different way than the rest of us do.” 

microclimatology at Texas Tech University who uses high-altitude aerial photography in his research in agriculture, said he thinks Swing Wing Productions has a place in the market, especially in advertising and marketing.

“It’s a bird’s eye rendition of objects on the ground,” Stephan Maas said.

While Maas is unsure if low-altitude aerial photography is the best option for capturing images of large-scale, commercial agriculture, he said he does see how it could be successful in different applications. There are many uses for low-altitude aerial photography and videography, he said, and it is beneficial in photographing smaller targets.

Additionally, Maas said he could see the potential for providing unique images to compliment photographs captured from the ground when developing marketing material. Whether it is a grove of wind turbines, a field of sunflowers, or a golf course, an aerial photograph can illustrate a unique story about its subject.

Missi Barton, Kris’ wife and biggest supporter, said she thinks Swing Wing Productions has the potential to make an impact on agriculture. It could not only be beneficial to this region, she said, but for the industry as a whole. Among other talks, Missi said Kris has had conversations with employees from Monsanto about his potential role in documenting parts of their cotton research. For Missi, she said she believes he will be able to apply his knowledge and background to expand the industry that sometimes seems antiquated from an outsider’s perspective.

However, Missi also appreciates his background from an entirely different perspective.

“With his roots in agriculture, Kris sometimes thinks he’s more of a city boy than he really is, but when it comes right down to it,” she said with a smile, “He’s just a good old farm boy, in the best way possible.”

Alexa Borowski
Lincoln, New Mexico

