

Veracity Aviation takes off

Derrick Smith knew he wanted to open his own helicopter flight school. He just didn't know he would be opening it so soon.

Smith was an instructor with Silver State Helicopters Inc. in New Braunfels when the company went out of business Feb. 3 and filed for bankruptcy. Across the country, Silver State left more than 700 people out of work and more than 2,000 students without their flight certifications and in some cases holding up to \$70,000 in debt.

The sudden failure of his employer prompted Smith to launch Veracity Aviation less than two weeks later. Smith picked the name, he said, because it is the opposite of how he felt Silver State was run.

"I hated working at Silver State," Smith said. "... I wanted to be completely opposite of that. And I thought the name kind of sounded like 'velocity.'"

Silver State founder and CEO Jerry Airola could not be reached for comment.

Smith runs his school in hangar space borrowed from Integrity Aviation at New Braunfels Municipal Airport. The majority of his students and other instructors are Silver State "orphans."

"A lot of the guys we got are students that need 10 to 30 hours to finish up what they need," Smith said.

He has eight students enrolled and about that many more waiting to sign up. Smith teaches the classes along with Michael Hoser, another full-time instructor from Silver State, and Neal Crookson, who works part time.

"Derrick as well as Michael Hoser were both my instructors with Silver State," said Alexander "Sandy" Plevich of Austin. "We got to talking. Derrick was asking me if I ever had a chance to take lessons somewhere else if I would. I told him, 'If the price is right.'"

Sooner than either of them suspected, Plevich was taking lessons from Smith through Veracity.

Plevich didn't get caught, like a number of other former Silver State students, with \$70,000 in student loan debt. Plevich paid for his classes in large installments. Today, he pays for about four lessons at a time. He said Veracity is more like the fixed-wing flying lessons he took in the early 1980s.

"We worked one on one with the instructor," Plevich said. "He taught you all your ground lessons and took you up for your flight time."

It was more like a factory at Silver State, with dozens of students meeting in classrooms and then jockeying for flight time among a few helicopters.

"At Veracity, they have one aircraft but they only have eight students," said Brandon Marks of San Marcos. "It's possible to get (flight) time. At Silver State, there were 75 students and five helicopters."

Marks said he and the other students trust Smith. Smith said he is working on a curriculum for the school, which would get it certified with the Federal Aviation Administration as a "part 141 school."

That means the FAA has signed off on the program and wouldn't have to constantly monitor the school. It also would make students eligible for federal student loans vs. commercial loans.

"Our primary focus is figuring out what a guy needs," Smith said. "We're just shooting people straight and providing a quality atmosphere for flight instruction. We knew all the stuff that was messed up about what we went through, and we're focused on how can we change it."

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