

Who We Are: Gasquet man fulfills dream of flying ... only it's by drone

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Growing up, Mike Cuthbertson always wanted to be a pilot.

The 63-year-old even had his chances. When he was 20, he learned to fly fixed-wing aircraft in Crescent City ... but he never got his license.

When he moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career, he learned to fly a helicopter. “But I did the same thing. I soloed twice, got 40 hours of flying experience, then quit. It was too expensive,” Cuthbertson said.

“It was always my dream to have a helicopter. Still is. If I were to win the lotto, I’d buy a helicopter.”

Cuthbertson has been retired for 12 years after working at Pelican Bay State Prison. He’s living in Gasquet with his best friend, Stoney, an Australian shepherd.

He said he’s satisfying his need to fly by piloting drones. And that didn’t require a lotto ticket to afford.

“I was up in Brookings one day about six years ago in Radio Shack. The guy introduced me to my first drone. I didn’t even know they existed.

“The guy showed me you could actually fly it with your phone. It had a camera and everything you could see through it. I was like, ‘Wow! This is the coolest toy ever!’”

He bought it, spending all of \$250. But within a matter of months, he discovered there were some really nice drones out there of better quality, with more technologically advanced camera systems.

“There are a lot of nice companies out there. One of the most popular is DJI out of China,” Cuthbertson said. “I had one - had it fly away from me. Long story. But I got it back.”

But he discovered the DJI came with too many restrictions. “They have a lot of hoops you have to jump through to fly, even here, because of where the airport is at.

“Even if I’m just flying down at Beachfront Park, I had to get special permission, which in my view was ridiculous. It’s a long way from the airport and flying this far (holding his hand up about 4 feet) off the ground is not going to affect anything.”

DJI came with stipulations, Cuthbertson said, that their drones have to be flown further than 5 miles from an airport. But Del Norte County Regional Airport’s runways jut out in several directions, further extending the restriction zone past ideal locations such as the harbor.

His latest model, an AUTELEVO made in Washington state, doesn’t have those restrictions. And its sticker price of \$1,500 wasn’t too much this time to abandon the pilot controls. The best part, he said, was how easy it was to learn and master.

“Once you learn them, they’re easy. You have the drone, with its controller, and use an app on your phone to see through the drone camera on your phone,” he said.

“I can put it at 1,000 feet, take my hands off and it sits there,” he added.

Cuthbertson created a YouTube channel, “GasquetMike,” to feature videos from his drone flights, highlighting from above the events and locations from around this region.

“The Gasquet raft race was the first time I hit a thousand views,” he said. “I guess you’ve got to get a million before you get a sponsor.”

For that personal touch, Cuthbertson puts a logo at the end of his videos that features him and his dog, labeling them “Mike and Stoney Productions.”

He said he doesn’t want to hire out his services to take photos or videos from his drone. He’d rather keep it a hobby.

“A friend of mine asked me to do deck party on the Fourth (of July). But you’ve got to be careful around people. You’re not supposed to fly around people.

“I did fly it at ‘Sea Cruise’ and at the Del Norte County Fair, and got some pictures for The Triplicate. But I’d rather volunteer my services.” he said.

Like the time a girl went missing at Lake Earl a few months ago, Cuthbertson said he went out there and looked for her by drone for three days.

“I never found her. I found out afterwards you’re not supposed to fly search and rescue without a license, I guess.”

One reason Cuthbertson prefers to keep his drone-piloting skills to himself is because, having worked in the movie industry, he knows how demanding people can get. Including the time last year he worked on the set of a Poland Springs bottled-water commercial being filmed near his home in Gasquet.

“They had a real big drone they’d brought up from L.A. They paid that crew \$12,000 a day. It was good money, but it didn’t look it would be fun,” he said.

“They had one guy flying, one guy on camera and another guy watching. It flew across the river to this spot and they were already losing contact. It wasn’t that far. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s as far as theirs can fly?’”

Right now, he said he’s got plenty of time on his hands. “Everybody always asks me what I do since I retired. I tell them I don’t know. The days go by, the weeks go by so fast, the years go by so fast.

“I’m always finding something to do. I joined the gym. Bought an old Jeep I’m fixing up. I walk my dog a lot. I come into town and walk 1 1/2 hours around downtown. We love doing that,” he said.

And he loves having fulfilled his childhood dream of flying.