





# WHEN INSTRUCTORS CRASH

Learning from tragedy

*By Josh Flowers*

*Eds. Note: The following article is based on a video Josh Flowers posted to his Aviation101 YouTube channel November 1, 2023.*



*I'm a pilot and flight instructor. I have a burning passion for aviation and just as much of a passion for filmmaking. I started making aviation YouTube videos in 2010, and as I've grown up and matured alongside my content, I've made it my mission to showcase safe practices while sharing the beauty this world has to offer through the lens of a camera.*



It's an overwhelming process for a student to step through flight training, whether they're getting their first certificate or adding a rating. They are new to this part of the process, and they're very much leaning on their flight instructors to teach them, to guide them, and to mentor them.



make a firm point not to drift from that mission while creating content. I'm not going to drift into the realm of accident reports and debriefs. There are channels that do that respectfully and do it well. I watch those people, I learn from their videos, but I don't aim to create that content. I don't have the credentials, I don't have the experience, and I don't have the desire.

Showcasing safe practices while sharing the beauty this world has to offer — that's my wheelhouse, and I don't intend to change lanes. But in this one instance, I will divert from my normal format.

The fatal accident rate in general aviation is unacceptably high compared to other facets of aviation, and we must get serious about becoming safer, more disciplined pilots, more responsible aircraft owners, and more professional flight instructors.

On September 27, 2023, there was a fatal airplane crash. You may ask yourself,

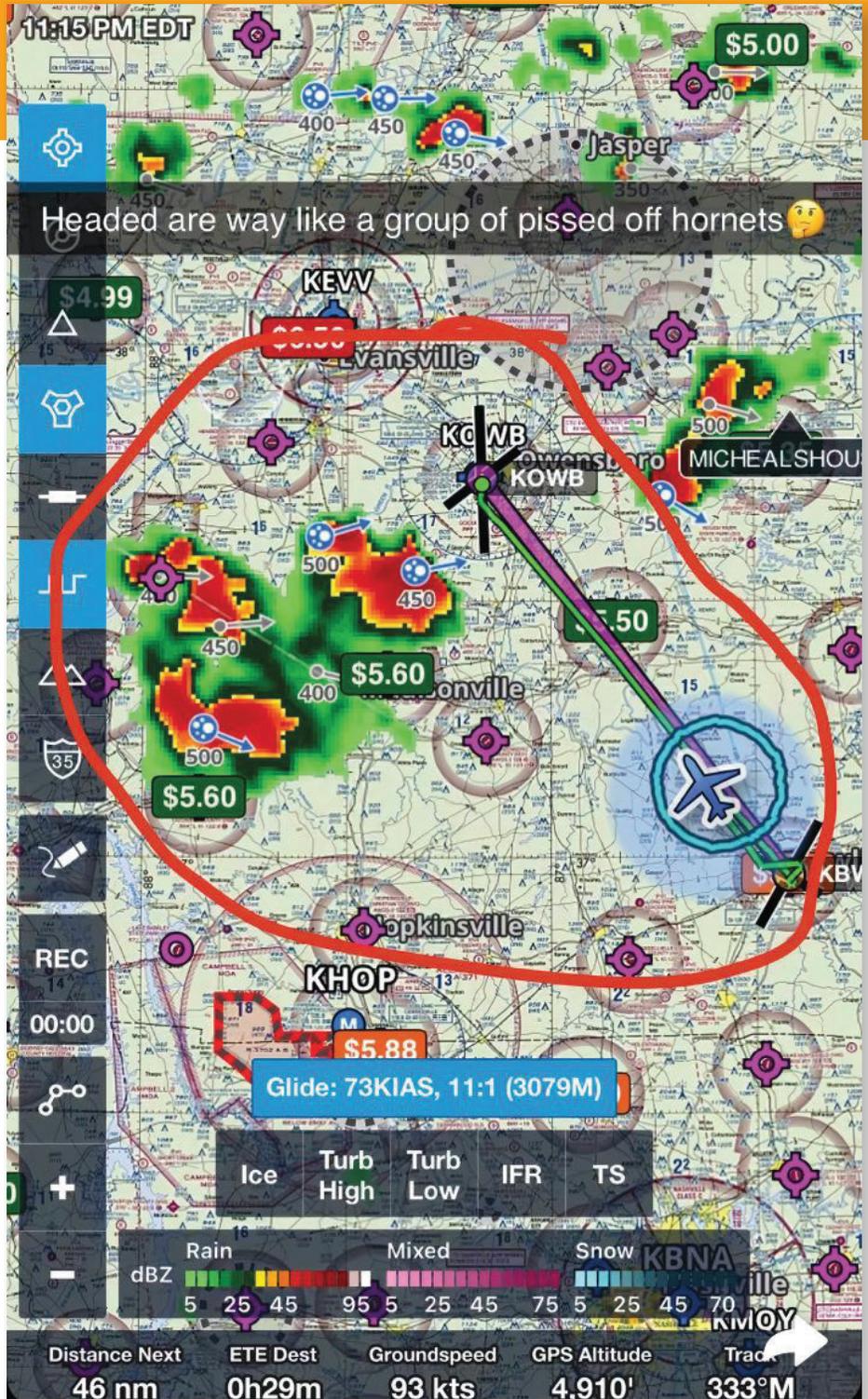
which one? It's sad that we have so many in general aviation that we have to ask that question to narrow it down. In Ohio County, Kentucky, a Piper PA-28 came apart in-flight after penetrating a supercell — they flew into a thunderstorm. It was a training flight, a student and a flight instructor on a night cross-country, and both suffered fatal injuries. The aircraft was ripped apart, and the debris was scattered over 25 acres. I'm not talking about this to go off about what I think caused the crash or what could have been done differently. That's the job of the NTSB, and it's very good at that job. At this point the NTSB has already released the preliminary report, and to those of us who are paying attention, it's blatantly obvious what happened. I wrote this to talk about a fatal human factors issue that massively contributed to or, dare I say, caused this accident.

My girlfriend, Chelsea Smith, and I were out traveling, but we heard about the accident almost before news of it

broke publicly since it happened in the immediate area where her family is from. We got a couple of texts from friends saying, "Fatal crash in Ohio County, it wasn't me." It's gut-wrenching to hear about this, especially as active aviators. Imagining the sheer terror these individuals felt in the final seconds of that flight is hard to stomach.

Relatively quickly after we heard about the accident, a screen recording surfaced via text to us, and within a few hours, it was already on the news and in the hands of the FAA. The screen recording is of the flight instructor's Snapchat. He was taking photos and videos before and during the accident flight that revealed a dynamic between him and the student pilot that broke my heart, and made my blood absolutely boil.

First is a video of this CFI shaking his head in disappointment. He then flips the camera to show the student slowly going through his preflight inspection



with a checklist and flashlight in his hand. The caption reads: “Me and this student would not get along if he was my full-time student. I’ve seen faster at the special Olympics.”

The next clip is a video of the CFI tapping his fingers on the fuselage as the student appears to be getting the cockpit ready for this night cross-country. The caption reads: “I don’t have to be up at 4:30 a.m. tomorrow or nothing. Let’s take our sweet ass time and have a conversation instead of getting this 3-hour flight done.”

The next clip is of the takeoff, and the caption reads: “This is gonna be a long 3-hour flight with Forrest Gump Jr. Let me tell you this, he is not still the smartest in his class.”

Next is a clip showing the cruise portion of the flight, followed by a photo leading us to the next caption, which reads: “1.6 hours into the flight of me giving it to him straight up. Forrest says: ‘I don’t mind

you being hard on me, I know I need it.’ Me thinking to myself: ‘Did you really think I cared if you minded?’ But what I actually said was, ‘We’re flying planes not driving a car, we can’t have these weak areas this far in the game.’”

The next and final slide of this recording is a screenshot of ForeFlight showing a few severe thunderstorms along their route. The caption reads: “Headed \*our\*

way like a group of pissed off hornets.”

Not long after that, the aircraft requested an IFR clearance, remarked about severe turbulence with the air traffic controller, and was advised by ATC to make an immediate turn to the east to get away from the weather. Then radar and radio contact were lost.

The NTSB will piece together all the details in due time to give us the full picture



of what happened so we can learn from this. But here's where I'm no longer willing to stay silent.

I do not care about what anyone does in their personal time — what they post on social media or who they hang out with. That's not my business.

However, when you cross into the arena of exercising the privileges of an FAA certificate, that is now my business. It's all our business, and it's the FAA's business. As FAA certificate holders, we all have a duty to represent our industry well and call out unsafe, damaging, unprofessional, and hazardous conduct.

It's an overwhelming process for a student to step through flight training, whether they're getting their first certificate or adding a rating. They are new to this part of the process, and they're very much leaning on their flight instructors to teach them, to guide them, and to mentor them.

If this CFI's Snapchat caption is accurate, it sounds like the student was aware of his weak areas, whatever those may have been, and was humble enough to address that openly. The CFI then mocked his humility.

As part of the Fundamentals of Instructing curriculum that flight instructors are tested on before earning the instructor certificate, we study the Five Hazardous Attitudes in Aviation:

1. Anti-Authority: "Don't tell me."
2. Impulsivity: "Do it quickly."
3. Invulnerability: "It won't happen to me."
4. Macho: "I can do it."
5. Resignation: "What's the use?"

All of these could become severe safety risks in anyone if gone unchecked. That includes you, and that includes me.

This CFI, in this Snapchat instance alone, displayed three out of five:

1. Impulsivity: Rushing the student to just get it done with the "I have better things to do" attitude. When you're on the clock as a flight instructor, your time belongs to mentoring that student, and to the safety of that flight. Period.
2. Invulnerability: Flying into bad weather for the sake of getting back to

Positive qualities in an instructor include challenging you, stretching your comfort zone and knowledge a little more in each lesson, and doing so in an encouraging, professional, and respectful manner.

Owensboro/Daviess County Regional Airport.

3. Macho: "I can do it better" than you. The Forrest Gump Jr. slur.

I'm not convinced this instructor knew the hazardous attitudes. He was certainly blissfully ignorant to the fact he was exhibiting them, and honestly probably hadn't laid eyes on them since his Fundamentals of Instructing written exam.

Based on the immature arrogance, lack of sound judgment, and publicly disrespectful attitude, I believe this guy had no business acting as a flight instructor. I know for a fact he went to a fast-track flight school to crank through his certificates and ratings to build time to go to the airlines. That's great — it's a path many choose, and it can be the easiest and most cost-effective way to get your minimum hours for the airline transport pilot certificate. But if you're going to use student pilots as steppingstones to your success, you had better be willing to give that job — and everything it entails — the respect it demands.

There are three pieces of advice I'd like to leave here:

**The first one is for the student pilots out there.** I'm talking to those of you who are maybe thinking about learning to fly someday, those who are working on their first certificate like private pilot, or those who already have certificates and ratings but are training for the next rating.

- Positive qualities in an instructor include challenging you, stretching your comfort zone and knowledge a little more in each lesson, and doing so in an encouraging, professional, and respectful manner. Feedback and criticism should *always* be constructive, and never destructive.

- If your instructor is chronically beating you down with insults, passive-aggressive jabs, and a disrespectful attitude (i.e., destructive criticism), you are well within your rights to communicate with them about that. Tell them you're not a fan of the way they deliver negative feedback to you, get their thoughts, and have a two-way conversation about it. If they're not receptive and blow you off, go to their boss. If they're the owner of the operation, then ask around and shop for a different school, or switch instructors.

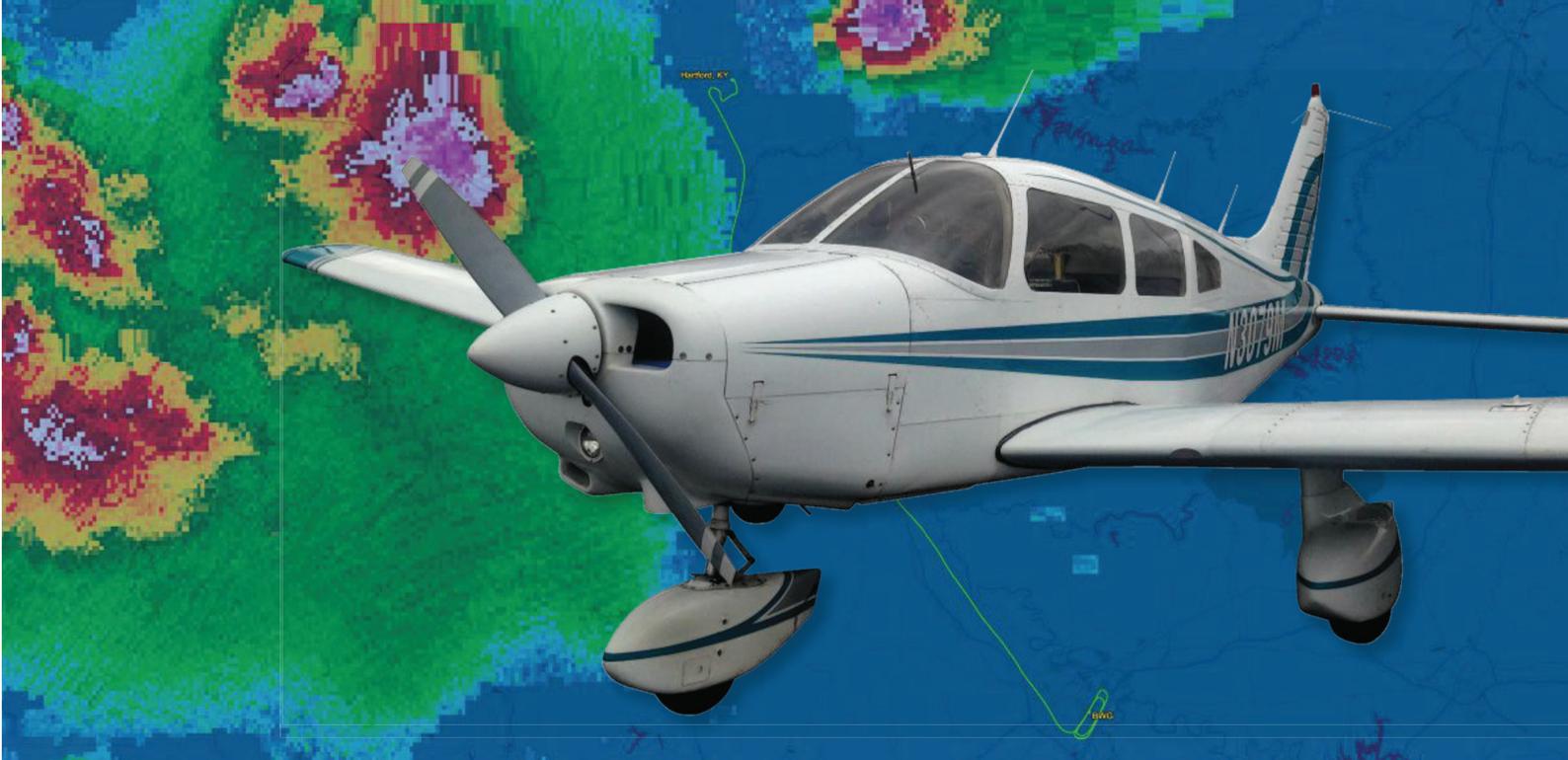
- There are good and bad instructors of all types. It is even better if you can find one who is a career CFI — meaning they are not merely using you as a steppingstone to get hours or money. They instruct because they love it. Those instructors are usually going to give you a better experience in learning to fly, and God, how I wish there were more of them out there.

- You're the customer. You are paying *them*. Research them, Google their name, ask them about their career and experience, ask around to see if they've been fired from other flight schools and if so why. You're trusting your life to this instructor, both when they are in that seat next to you and when you're signed off and flying solo with their taught habits, so get to know them and advocate for yourself if you have to.

**The second piece of advice is for the pilots out there,** whether you're a full-time professional pilot or you fly for fun on the weekends.

- Be the best role model you can be to other pilots and students. Use conservative judgment, and make safety a ritual, not a talking point. Use a checklist at every phase change. It baffles me how many pilots *don't* use a checklist, as if they're above that "student pilot crutch."

- Be disciplined in your flying. You don't always have an instructor there to give you



feedback on your behavior or judgment, so it's up to you to hold yourself accountable to be the safest pilot you know.

- Fly with other pilots who you respect often and be open to feedback in the cockpit. Just remember that not all feedback is good feedback — be a critical thinker.

- Go up with a flight instructor more often than your flight review requires you to and take recurrent training seriously. Don't limit your recurrent training to the bare minimum that the regulations require. You owe it to yourself and your passengers to be more than a bare-minimum aviator.

- Pilots are ambassadors to aviation just as much as instructors are. Be a respectable aviator, never stop training, employ safety-centric habits in your flying, and be a positive role model for new pilots ... and old pilots too for that matter.

**Lastly, to all flight instructors out there.**

- The law of primacy is another piece of the Fundamentals of Instructing curriculum. It states: "Primacy, the state of being first, often creates a strong, almost unshakable, impression." Students are absorbing everything you say and do, habits and attitudes — the good *and* the bad.

- Your job isn't simply to bark at a student when they screw up, log the hours, collect their money, and schedule the next time. We're expected to be role models, and we took an oath to be professional ambassadors to aviation.

- Think back to high school or college. Who was your favorite teacher or professor? I'd be willing to bet they were the mentor figure you could visit in their office any time with your questions. They asserted their leadership in a respectful way, and made you feel *good* about yourself while showing you the way to success. I can think of several of those awesome people in my schooling.

- If you're going to use your instructor certificate as a steppingstone to a flying career, that's fine — that's great! But you better take it seriously because your actions and conduct are directly affecting other people's lives and the pursuit of their own career and dreams.

- I invite you to check your ego, put yourself in each of your students' shoes, and ask: What kind of experience am I giving these students? Even better, *ask* your students to give their honest feedback about you and the services you were hired to provide to them.

- Be ready for constructive criticism. Don't get defensive, hear them out, and have an adult conversation about it. Don't let your own hazardous attitudes put a stop to a constructive conversation or prevent it altogether.

There are so many amazing flight instructors out there doing an amazing job as aviation ambassadors. At the same time there are so many downright bad flight instructors who are far too arrogant, immature, and disrespectful to hold that

certificate. It's our job as aviation ambassadors to:

1. Be aware of our own hazardous attitudes first and foremost — that's called humility.
2. Call out unprofessional behavior when we see it. It might be uncomfortable, but it's required.
3. Put a stop to unsafe habits and attitudes before they lead to a fatal accident, like this one.

Looking at the details of this accident and all the others like it has really forced me to look inward at my own behaviors, attitudes, and judgments. Of course, the image I see isn't without flaws, and I invite you to do the same thing with yourself regularly. That's what I'm going to do. We, as an industry, can do better than this.

I want you to stay happy, stay healthy, stay current, and most importantly, stay proficient. Students, keep an open mind and advocate for yourself. Pilots, be safe and responsible aviators. Never stop learning. Instructors, check your ego. Be a positive role model to your students and be the change that we need in aviation.

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*Josh Flowers is an active flight instructor who has combined his passion of aviation and filmmaking with his Aviation101 YouTube channel. He has an audience of 300,000 subscribers, fulfilling his mission of showcasing safe flight practices while enjoying the beauty the world has to offer, one flying video at a time. You can find him at [www.Aviation101.com](http://www.Aviation101.com).*

# NAFI Commentary

**T**he tragedy that occurred in September hit many of us in the instructional community like a gut punch. We were left reeling in shock at the CFI's actions from preflight to the flight's tragic conclusion. Focus has been on the publicly available postings of the CFI from that evening, but we can anticipate that the NTSB investigation will extend well beyond that event. The NTSB will likely work to develop a fuller picture of the individual through interviews, previous social media posts, training records, prior flight actions taken, and other activity. The question of "Why?" inevitably arises. Why did the flight instructor behave as he did? In this case we will never know, but it seems clear that he was either not familiar with or not complying with the professional responsibilities of a flight instructor. Several points extracted from The National Association of Flight Instructors Code of Ethics follow:

We, the members of the National Association of Flight Instructors, accept the responsibility to practice our profession according to the highest ethical standards.

Therefore, we pledge always to:

- **Provide** a safe and effective learning situation for our students.
- Continually **improve** our own teaching and flying skills through education and operational experiences.
- **Adhere** to safe practice and to applicable federal and state aviation regulations.
- **Treat** all fellow flight instructors with respect.
- **Conduct** both our professional and personal lives in a manner to reflect credit on the profession and to set an example of self-discipline for all pilots.
- **Encourage** our fellow flight instructors and the organizations in which they teach to uphold and support these principles, and to question and resist those practices that may under-

mine or defeat them.

Attitude, ethics, and behavior are closely related. Points about aviation hazardous attitudes have been raised in relationship to this accident, but let's also consider the attitude of professionalism. Developing professionalism as a fundamental trait of every flight instructor can mitigate unprofessional behavior. Why would a flight instructor not demonstrate a professional attitude? There are numerous possibilities that are situationally dependent. Role models, training, and flight school culture are but a few considerations. Another may be related to the short-term nature of flight instructing for pilots seeking an airline career. The average pay for a new CFI springs to mind as well. The money and benefits received from flight instructing pale in comparison to that anticipated as a new airline hire. The non-commensurate responsibility/reward profiles can result in a belief that the flight training role is a less professional, temporary position. What can be done? It's up to us as a community to look both within and without, assess our own attitudes, and promote professional ethics consistently throughout the industry. This September accident is a sad reminder that aviation can be non-forgiving. That event resulted in the heartbreaking loss of two lives. The CFI involved will not have an opportunity to learn from his mistakes, but we can help to prevent similar tragedies.

*Karen Kalishek,  
NAFI board chair*

Kudos to Josh Flowers for a carefully worded response to a bad example set by this flight instructor that resulted in a tragic outcome.

As a new IFR learner, I encountered a flight instructor who had an obvious case of superiority due to his vast experience or knowledge gap over me. A CFI should not subject learners to this kind of behavior. I recognized the problem was not me

and avoided this CFI after one lesson. My professional concern now as a CFI is that one lesson could be all it takes to end up in this situation. If we observe something like this happening with a fellow CFI, we should be willing and able to step up and diplomatically confront the situation both for the learner's benefit and for the industry. The learner (and most likely the CFI) may be put off by the exchange, but the idea that the learner has a say in what is happening will be revealed in the process.

Arrogance can happen at any rate of payment for the CFI, so I respectfully say that this could be one of many reasons a CFI may feel underappreciated and therefore lash out at a learner over the (obvious to you) simple mistakes made. It is indicative of a problem with the CFI, however, not the learner.

The risk management courses King Schools have are very good and should become a focus in training for the purpose of making the flight training industry's safety record improve. Hazardous attitudes in flight instruction should be red flags for learners and especially for CFIs. The Kings have made these courses free to NAFI members due to the importance of the subject of risk management in flight training.

*Gus Putsche,  
NAFI board member*

*Eds. Note: You can find the King Schools Risk Management Course Bundle here: [tinyurl.com/NAFIRisk](http://tinyurl.com/NAFIRisk).*

As an organization, this accident both frustrates and fuels a desire to reach more CFIs with our safety and professionalism message. All accidents share the same root cause — hazardous attitudes. While this particular accident manifested through a young flight instructor — one in which he and his student paid the ultimate sacrifice — let us not forget that no one is immune

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to accidents. Hazardous attitudes and get-there-itis have claimed many lives through various other manifestations. Our struggle as an organization is how can we both use every accident as a teaching moment for every CFI (because no one is immune to accidents), yet have the ability to reach those who are most on the fringe of susceptibility?

Thank you for being a valued member of NAFI and taking advantage of its numerous educational resources — from this magazine, to NAFI Summit, MentorLIVE, eMentor, More Right Rudder podcast, NOTAMs blog, NAFI Professional Development Program, and the Professional Development Center at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh. Your dedication and commitment to safety and professionalism drives our industry. Please tell a friend of the resources and value of your membership as we together raise the level of professionalism in flight instruction. Through connections and word of mouth you will help us help those who need it most.

**Adam Magee,**  
*NAFI treasurer and board member*

I posted two comments to the CFI Discussion Group, Certificated Flight Instructor, when I first saw this video. 1. Last summer, I spoke about the morality of being a CFI at the NAFI's Professional Development Center at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh, and again at NAFI Summit. I've always been passionate about this subject and am even more so now. It's very simple: It's not "just flying." We can affect people's lives for good or for evil, depending on our attitude. As I tell every one of my students, I'm not training for them — I'm training for every trusting soul around them. 2. The accident rate is going down. However, the second highest category of fatal accidents is instructional flight, which is patently crazy. The safest flying in general aviation should be instructional flying! We're the ones who

should be setting the example and ensuring everything comes out well every time.

**Robert Meder,**  
*NAFI board member and chair emeritus*

1. This profession is not a game. It is life and death.

2. This profession can kill you. Yes, you. In an instant.

You either strive every day to act like a professional, care about your passengers and students, live by a non-negotiable code of ethics, and have integrity. Or you don't.

You either make risk mitigation your primary job, or you decide hope is a strategy and leave it all to chance.

You either acknowledge that not *all* risks can be mitigated and treat the fact that you may not know when you're departing on your last flight with the maturity that it demands, or you're fooling yourself.

You either step up as a leader and refuse to tolerate risky, asinine, or unprofessional behavior around you, or you brush it off as "just one bad apple" and decide it isn't your problem.

It's not just about you. It never was. Grow up. Step up.

**Aaron Dabney,**  
*NAFI board member*

Through their teaching and guidance, flight instructors play a critical role in shaping the future of aviation. As professional educators, they must maintain unwavering integrity and professionalism. They must resist the temptation to appear on social media as a method of self-aggrandizement. It certainly is not a place to publicly shame students for their weaknesses or mistakes. Instead, instructors must foster trust and respect, and cultivate a safe space for learning and growth. By remaining steadfast in their commitment to ethical teaching practic-

es, instructors garner respect from their students and develop a meaningful learning environment, which enables their students to develop similar qualities.

**Brian Schiff,**  
*NAFI board member*

When I taught captain leadership classes at the airline, I asked the soon-to-be captains what their new responsibilities would be. The usual responses were safety, setting the tone, being the single point of contact for irregular operations, good communication, and buying the beer on the overnights. All those and others are certainly true. But then I would go on to say that I was going to raise the bar. I told the class that every time they flew, they were potentially responsible for the outcome of the entire industry. And if they didn't believe it, to think about two events, separated by a month in 2009 — US Airways 1549 and Colgan 3407. In the first, through the actions of the flight deck and cabin crew, words such as heroes and miracles were used. The next month, due to the actions and inactions of the flight deck crew, in addition to lives lost, the professionalism of the industry was called into question, especially at the regionals. Many new rules came out of Colgan that have impacted the industry forever.

It is no different in general aviation. Regardless of the plane or the mission, we all can impact the industry in a positive way by being professional, by being a mentor, and by sharing the joy of flying with others. Or we can be the subject of criticism, ridicule, and loss.

It's all about our legacy. We don't have to be involved in a 1549 or 3407 type of event to make an impact. We can do it one flight at a time, one day at a time, one person at a time. Our legacy is not created when we're gone. It's formed by how we live. 

**Paul Preidecker,**  
*NAFI president*