

## **Flying With Purpose**

*Mike Daniel's flight path blends aviation, design, and community at the Truckee Tahoe Airport*

By Tiffany Connolly

The Truckee Tahoe Airport has taken a significant stride forward with the recent adoption of their Flight Path for Alignment Strategic Plan, an initiative that lays out clear guidelines and strategies focused on the airport's future. In addition to mapping goals for operations, economy, and the environment, they are committed to community benefits and partnerships. As part of this, one figure perfectly embodies the spirit of this aspect of the airport's strategic plan.

Mike Daniel, a local KTRK pilot and Truckee resident, takes to the air not only for the joy flight brings; he's also continually seeking ways to connect aviation with STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics). You may have seen his bush plane at the Truckee Tahoe Airport; it's the one with the image of the Cheshire Cat wrapped on its tail, the mischievous grin gazing out at you, a QR code embedded in its design. His Cheshire Cat craft is the perfect example of how Mike has integrated aviation with STEAM.

### **A Staple Figure at Truckee Tahoe Airport**

Mike was an airport regular even before he earned his wings in 2019 through Mountain Lion Aviation. A self-described loiterer in the Red Truck Cafe dining area, he banters and swaps stories and ideas with the other regulars — a familiar crew of pilots and others who are deeply passionate about anything related to aviation. "You see all the same people and always have good conversations around aviation and whatnot," Mike says. "The conversations that are happening around the airport are super innovative and thoughtful."

Mike appreciates these interactions; he's a creative and a visionary, two qualities integral to his success in design. With a background in working with big Bay Area agencies, he eventually branched off on his own. He continues to collaborate with notable brands like Red Bull and Vans and is involved in event conceptualization for action sports. That's another passion of Mike's — his involvement in action sports reflects the skateboarding days of his youth. Today, his fat tire bush plane with its Cheshire Cat iconography exemplifies how he merges creativity and flight.

### **Blending Design with Aviation**

The Cheshire Cat design carries more meaning than being a cool design on his plane. It's a symbol of guidance and discovery, mirroring the cat's role as the guiding force in Alice's journey in the *Alice in Wonderland* tale. The concept goes a step further with its augmented reality feature, where scanning a QR code embedded in the design brings the cat to life, weaving technology, design, storytelling, and aviation.

Mike would love to see aviation — which he sees as outdated — catch up with technology and appeal to a new generation of pilots. He wonders why major airlines haven't embraced augmented reality, providing codes on their wings to create more connections with their clients. "Why don't the big airlines have a QR code on the end of the winglets, right? Give customers some brand interaction," he suggests.

In addition to scheming ways to pull together seemingly unrelated elements for the greater good, Mike also strives to make his pursuits more meaningful, which is how he dreamt up his YouTube program, [Backseat Stories](#).

### **Finding Meaning in his Plane's Backseat**

With Mike at the controls of The Cheshire Cat and Grant Washburn in the backseat, they take off from the Half Moon Bay airport. Grant is a legendary big wave rider who put Mavericks, an iconic northern California surf break, on the map of big wave surfing. The chat that ensues between Mike and Grant as they soar above the Pacific Ocean, Mavericks firing below, is the premise of this particular episode of *Backseat Stories*, called [Riding the Waves of Insight](#). Their conversation is meaningful, a lively discussion of technological advancements that track and monitor oceanic patterns.

An earlier *Backseat Stories* episode, *The Half Brain Project*, featured big mountain snowboarder Jim Zellers, who shares his story of the first and only known snowboard descent of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.

"I was trying to figure out how I can fly with some purpose versus always getting in the plane and burning fuel and going somewhere just to turn around and come home," Mike says. "Flying is a lot more rewarding when you have an objective. And so I came up with this idea of *Backseat Stories*."

*Backseat Stories* plans to feature other big names in the action sports industry, highlighting those inspiring others or making an impact. The focus on action sports aligns with Mike's surf, skate, and snow roots.

## **From Surf to Sky**

In the early 1990s, Mike was living the dream of any young person lucky enough to live in the West. His passions were dictated by the weather, paddling out in Santa Barbara's ocean breaks when the waves lined up right and chasing storms to Colorado. He made Colorado home while attending college, then moved to San Francisco to pursue his design career. After marrying his wife, whose family had a house in Lake Tahoe, and growing his family by the addition of two kids, he moved to Truckee in 2014.

Today, Mike's big ideas of creating connections have continued, and his ideas focus on how the airport's potential can benefit the community. Inspired by the Compton/Woodley Airport in south Los Angeles County, Mike envisions the Truckee Tahoe Airport transforming into a bustling community hub. He likes the idea of an aviation museum, shared workspaces, and monthly swap meets where the Truckee/Tahoe community can easily exchange gear — utilizing the airport grounds in ways that directly benefit the community, leveraging the space for events, education, and inspiration. "Now, Compton is a whole different ball game than Truckee, but it's the idea of having a space where people can do their homework or work on aircraft or build kit planes and engage in all this inspiring stuff in the world of aviation," he says.

Despite the challenges of inspiring his own children to embrace aviation with the same enthusiasm, Mike remains dedicated to influencing and encouraging connections between youth, aviation, modern technology, storytelling, design, and all things STEAM. *Backseat Stories* is just one example of how he combines his passions to create a purposeful flying experience for himself, his guests, and all who listen. Through his commitment to flying with purpose, Mike Daniel exemplifies the essence of what the Truckee Tahoe Airport aims to achieve: a stronger, more connected community.