

# Soar:

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so they weren't sure how many classes they would be able to offer," she said. "Hopefully, next year the schedule will be designed so that the classes will be available to more."

The first-year class caters primarily to freshmen and sophomores, while the second year is for juniors and seniors.

## Aviation background

Rindfleisch always wanted to be a pilot, but she wanted more than that.

"My dad's a pilot and he did a lot of backcountry flying when I was a kid in Idaho, mostly in the Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness," she said. "We lived about 15 miles upriver from Riggins. ... I wanted to fly. ... But I like to understand it. I took ground school in Hood River. ... I told my dad, 'I need to know how they work.' If I fly in the backcountry and something breaks down, I need to know how to fix it."



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain  
A metal lathe, left, and a drill press are two of the machines aviation students learn to use in Lexi Rindfleisch's aviation classes at Joseph Charter School.

That led her to the two-year Aircraft Maintenance Technology program at Idaho State University in Pocatello.

"When I moved back to Idaho, I bought a house ... and decided I was going to go back to school to continue my education," she said. "Eight weeks later, I was accepted into the program at ISU."

Rindfleisch was eager to get the job at Joseph.

"My husband's cousin, who lives in Enterprise, said, 'I've got this perfect

job for you.' So I talked to Lance Homan, the superintendent here, and sent him my resume, and he was like, 'When can we meet?'"

Her husband, Josh Rindfleisch, is a freelance videographer/photographer, she said.

She also is working on her pilot's license, but still lacks several hours in the air before that's achieved.

## The program

Rindfleisch said that even once she gets her pilot's license, she's not sure she'll

be able to teach flying as part of the school program. She did say it's conceivable she could teach the ground school portion of learning to fly.

"I don't know if that's something we can do on school time, but we may be able to introduce them to pilot's certification and if that's something they want to do, we could help them get scholarships," she said. "Obviously, that would be working with their families."

In addition to the simulator — which still needs to be calibrated before it's usable — there are "parts of" three aircraft in the CTE Building. One of them is a Fisher Experimental with a Subaru automobile motor that has been retrofitted for use in the aircraft.

The students will be learning about aircraft mechanics in a truly hands-on way at the school. Rindfleisch said that once a plane is airworthy, the wings can be removed and it can be taken to the Joseph State Airport to fly. But that's still in the future.

She hopes to see the school's aviation program

expand to K-12.

"The goal is to expose kids to all types of aviation, from the mechanics side, the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), the weather side, the pilot's side, air-traffic control — all of those pieces," she said. "That would be a beginning-aviation course work and classes and then actually dive into what they're really interested in. Eventually, I'd like this to be a K-12 aviation program."

Plans for the latter are underway.

"We're already working on little lesson plans for (younger students) for this year, but hopefully it will be something that they do more often," she said.

## 'Community of aviators'

Two of the students with Rindfleisch during the Sept. 23 interview covered the gamut from "would like to" take aviation to one who already is.

"I have pilots in my class," Rindfleisch said.

"I remember graduating from aviation my freshman

year," said Jett Peterson, who proudly showed off his student pilot's license. "It's just like a learner's permit only to fly."

Savanah Seeley, on the other hand, has yet to try her wings in the program.

"I want to take it, but I haven't yet," she said.

The two youths — and the other aviation students — are part of an active aviation community in Wallowa County. Although there are but the two public airports — in Joseph and Enterprise — there are a number of private landing strips scattered around the county.

"This is such a community of aviators. After I get myself a little more with them and their vision for it as well, and where they see themselves fitting," Rindfleisch said. "I certainly am not an expert in all things aviation and I want the people who are helping, as well, and involved with the kids and getting them excited. It's going to be a community process. In terms of the ground school, they can take ground school and take flying lessons at the same time."

# Workers:

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much of his success to luck, his company's achievements in hiring and maintaining staff seem to be more than a fluke.

First, he said, crane businesses attract a special sort of person. Karlson's company employs 12 crane operators and drivers. Karlson is himself an experienced crane operator and knows a thing or two about this type of worker.

Crane operators, he said, are excited by the challenge of their work. Often, prior to beginning their careers, they looked up at cranes while doing other construction, and they wanted to get behind the controls of the huge machines.

## ONLINE

See this story at wallowa.com for an interview with leading state economists.

This desire, he said, is sometimes hidden deep in their hearts. When they finally talk to an employer about crane work and they learn about the opportunities, they are excited. And when they get a job, often they do not want to leave it.

Being able to offer employees a challenging, fulfilling and enjoyable job, then, accounts for part of N.W. Crane's employment success. This is not the end of the explanation, however.

A major reason Karlson has been able to foster loyalty is because he offers in-house certifications,

which employees appreciate. Certificates are important for crane operators. Many work sites, including ones owned by Amazon, allow only certified workers. And many employers, Karlson said, require employees to find and pay for their own certificates.

He said he suspects his employees appreciate their training, but also other perks. He offers insurance and vacations. Depending on their experience, a new driver can earn \$20 to \$22 per hour. His crane operators can earn \$23 to \$40 or more.

These are nonunion jobs, but Karlson said employees can benefit from not being union members. Union employees, he said, might have to wait years before they can receive crane training. This is not the case for his workers — they can start

training right away.

Turnover, then, is low, according to Karlson. His workers appreciate their jobs and the benefits of their labor, so they work well, but this is not all. They did not just start working hard when they joined his company; they started as good workers.

Karlson relies on pre-employment interviews to screen potential employees. Even if he has to do interviews by Zoom, rather than in person, he likes to be able to look a potential employee in the eye. He said he tries to figure their abilities and their character. If he thinks an employee will be a good fit, he said, they usually are.

Karlson said his company is "in the best position we've ever been," and this is during a pandemic when many other companies are

struggling to retain or to find employees.

N.W. Crane has experience in worker relations, which Karlson attributed to its humble beginnings. The company grew as part of N.W. Metal Fabricators Inc., a company owned by his father, Kerry Karlson. His father was doing well with metal fabricating, but he saw the need for cranes. When he started operating his own crane, more and more employers approached him for help. He added a second crane, which led to more.

By 2005, the crane side of the business was large enough to justify a separate business, and N.W. Crane Services was born. It began operating on its own property, separate from the fabrication company from which it started.

A family operation that

has developed since Karlson's father first came to Hermiston with his family in 1986, the companies treat their workers like family, according to Karlson. That approach has "gone a long way" to inspiring employees to stay, he said.

Having experienced workers is vital, Karlson said, because their jobs are no small feat.

He has nine cranes. The smallest weighs 40 tons. The largest tops out at 550 tons. He recently had this biggest crane on site at Lamb Weston. It took 15 semitrailers to move the crane and a 60-ton support crane to put it together. Taking it down, after the job, takes his staff 5½ hours of coordinated, skilled and difficult work.

"They're amazing," Karlson said of his employees.

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