

## **Retirees put skills to work in restoring airplanes.**

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*"Our airpark volunteers, and all-the volunteers-who help out throughout the City of Palmdale, are critical to the ongoing success and operations of places such as the airpark."-. Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford*

Visitors young and old have, flocked to the Joe Davies Heritage Airpark at Palmdale Plant 42 to see up close the aircraft that helped make this area the Aerospace Valley.

The ever-growing collection of airplanes' on display, now numbering 14 plus one scale model, have all been lovingly restored and prepared for the public to enjoy by a dedicated group of volunteers, mostly retirees from the local aerospace industry.

"It's more a thing of passion than anything else," said longtime volunteer Jay Tweed.

Over the years, the park volunteers have donated more than 154,000 hours of work, restoring aircraft as well as providing regular up keep.

Of the 20 volunteers active at the park on a regular basis, only three do not have a background in aerospace.

"Most of us have been in aerospace our entire lives," said 'Tweed, who counts a 20-year Air Force career, mostly spent at Edwards Air Force Base, and another 25 years at Lockheed Martin's Skunk Works in his aerospace resume. But he has been involved in flying since he was a 10-year old in 1952. "I'm pretty much the norm for most of these guys," he said. "You really have to have this passion to come out and do this every week"

The group meets twice a week, on Wednesday and Thursday, to work on the various restoration and maintenance projects. About 12 to 15 volunteers meet on any given work day, gathering over coffee and donuts in the small office festooned with airplane pictures and other aviation memorabilia.

Next door to the office is the well-equipped workshop, where much of the machinery was donated when no longer needed by local defense firms.

Louie Provencio, who turns 84 next month, is the group's most senior member and has been with the project since the beginning. "I've been working on airplanes since I was 16 years old," he said, with a career that included stints at Convair in San Diego and Lockheed in Burbank and Palmdale. "I've been working airplanes a long time and I still can't get away from it. It's in my blood," he said.

Bill Cook counts himself as "the oddball of the crowd." Although he spent 37 years with Lockheed, it was as a "bean counter" on the business side of the outfit.

Rod Kersten is another who didn't come to the airpark with aviation experience, "We invited him in for coffee and he never left," Tweed said. A builder with knowledge of sheet metal, ducting and air conditioning systems, he has put his skills to work on the restoration projects, "I got tired "of looking at the walls. You have to do something, you can't just sit, Kersten said. "I've also met a lot of interesting people along the way:"

Each volunteer brings his own skill set for the projects, whether it is sheet metal work, machining parts, electrical systems, painting, engineering, manufacturing or other skills.

"Our airpark volunteers, and all the volunteers who help out throughout the city of Palmdale, are critical to the ongoing success and operations of places such as the airpark," said Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford. "Their what can I do, for you attitude is inspiring and contagious." The truth of the matter is, we couldn't do what we do without them".

The group's most recent project is an extensive restoration of a C-46 cargo plane, which saw Air Force service in Alaska in the 1950s. When the park acquired the aircraft in 2005, it was little more than a

battered fuselage and a pile of parts.



Former Lockheed test pilot Dave Kerzie helps restore a C-46 cargo plane located at the Joe Davies Heritage Airpark at Plant 42 in Palmdale.

"It was a basket case," said Dave Kerzie.

Kerzie, another Lockheed Martin alumni who was chief test pilot for the U-2 and L-1011 programs after his Air Force: career, has spent months recreating the instrument panel and other aspects of the twin seat cockpit.

"My whole life I flew airplanes," he said, "I always respected the guys in the ground crews, " but I never really had a feeling for what they did until I built my own airplane, then came' here.

"You learn a lot, too," he said of the restoration projects.

He consulted with aircraft restorers at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum to learn how to rewrite the wording on various levers and other parts of the panels.

The goal on this project is not strict authenticity but rather to restore the overall appearance of the airplane -inside and out- in order to give visitors a good idea of what it was like in its heyday.

Once complete, visitors will be able to get inside the cockpit and get a feel for what flying the C-46 was like, even if one of the control yokes is from a go-kart rather than an airplane.

"We primarily did it for the kids, so they can come up here and move things around," Kerzie said.

Often the restoration work requires detective work to track down long lost parts, sometimes coupled with long trips to retrieve them. Failing that, the volunteers put their skills to use in building the parts themselves from scratch. The cockpit seats for the C-46 are one such example.

After months of work, the airplane will soon be ready for display, a spiffy new paint job (they use a water-based automotive paint) is nearly complete.

