

Business + Careers



COOL JOBS

TREETOPS MEDIA

Clay Huff, 29

BY AMANDA KAWALEK
PHOTO BY NICOLE DIXON

Hovering 500 feet above the ground, propeller blades spinning up to 50 miles per hour, Clay Huff's helicopter closes in on its target. He focuses his view, finds the perfect angle and then he's ready to shoot . . . a photograph.

Huff's helicopter is actually a 17-pound battery-operated device that holds a high-resolution camera. Using a hand-held controller equipped with levers, buttons, and a small television-like screen to watch the camera's movement, Huff steers the chopper and studies its angles in order to capture the perfect photo.

Owner and operator of his own company, Treetops Media, the 29-year-old Bowling Green State University alum shoots aerial photographs and video with the miniature helicopter, a model he constructed, designed and learned to fly on his own. The finished product, now sturdily built and flawlessly wired, took nearly two years of crash-and-burn flights for him to complete.

The mechanics of the helicopter, however, were only half the struggle. Like his father and grandpa, Huff has always had a knack for inventing and working with his hands, but the photography component was a completely new skill he had to learn.

Because so few companies of this kind exist throughout the United States, most people have yet to understand what aerial photography can do for their business, Huff said. Treetops Media equipment can capture images while hovering as low as 5 feet off the ground, or as high as 1,000 feet, the same height at which a regular helicopter or airplane takes aerial photography.

"This opens up a whole new dimension

of angles and heights that people never really considered before," he said. "I do think this is the future. We don't need to have people in a plane to take these photos anymore."

Treetops Media is beginning to increase its notoriety with local businesses, but launching the company took serious work.

"I was naïve in the beginning," he said. "I was trying to run before I could walk. I had no idea how hard it would be from a technical standpoint. I thought I'd be making a ton of money in the first few months."

Treetops Media hasn't hit the jackpot yet, but after following through on a clever impulse last year, Huff got his first taste of true success. While watching the non-stop Anna Nicole news coverage, he knew his helicopter could get a better picture. On a whim, he bought a plane ticket to the Bahamas and days later, sold his aerial photos of the funeral to the Associated Press.

Huff's regular clients include real estate groups, construction companies and developers, but he's looking to expand the business. In the near future, he hopes to start taking photos and even video for outdoor weddings, as well as law firms that need pictures for car accident cases, investigations, or site inspections. Eventually, he would like to break into the paparazzi business, similar to his Anna Nicole stint.

"I think I'll be doing this in two years, but I'm not 100 percent sure," he said. "It's hard to determine how much potential there is for business because no one really knows about this business yet."

Though Huff began to develop Treetops Media two and a half years ago, the last year has really allowed him to grow the business and perfect his flying and photography techniques.

"It was a challenge at first, but I'm definitely making it as a business," he said. "I'm good now, but there's always more to learn. When you fly these (helicopters), you can never be too good." 

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