

Operations manager is airport groundskeeper



ARIAN SCHUESSLER, The Globe Gazette

David Sims, operations manager at the Mason City Municipal Airport, stands outside the airport fire station.

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MASON CITY | From the time he was in high school in Mississippi, David Sims wanted to be a commercial airline pilot.

"I've always been interested in aviation," said Sims, 31, operations manager at Mason City Municipal Airport since 2006.

He went to Louisiana Tech University and got a degree in aviation management. His career plans took a sharp turn on Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists rammed planes into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington while a third plane crashed in Pennsylvania.

"After 9/11, the airlines started downsizing and pilots' jobs were hard to come by," said Sims. "People don't think about it today because today there is a pilot shortage. Back then, jobs were eliminated."

So Sims turned his attention to aviation management -- the kinds of things that are done on the ground to make airports functional -- and that's what he does at Mason City Municipal Airport.

As operations manager, he deals with everything except the airplanes, he said.

After getting an internship at Stennis International Airport in Mississippi and working at a few odd jobs, Sims came to Mason City in May 2006 as a maintenance worker and became operations supervisor in 2011.

"He supervises three employees and plans, organizes, manages and directs all operations and maintenance activities in accordance with FAA, state and local requirements," said Pam Osgood, airport manager.

"He has many other duties, too. He is truly an asset to the airport," she said.

Sims is responsible for just about everything on the 1,100-acre complex of the airport, including the on-site fire station and truck.

"The FAA requires that we have a fire station within three minutes of where flights come in," he said. "If a situation occurred, we would always call the Mason City and Clear Lake fire departments, but we have trained fire personnel here."

In fact, someone has to be manning the fire station every time a flight comes in, he said.

Airport Commission Chairwoman Joni Dunn said Sims is so knowledgeable about FAA regulations and airport operations that other entities have contacted him for advice and guidance.

"He is excellent at organizing and coordinating what needs to be done," she said. "He is reliable, knowledgeable and dependable."

As he provided guests a tour of the airport grounds, he would push a button to open gates, then drive through and wait until the gates closed behind him before proceeding further.

Asked if that was a security precaution that came about after 9/11, he said there was a more practical safety precaution to it.

"It really doesn't have anything to do with terrorism," he said. "At airports, sometimes motorists coming in have a tendency of following the vehicle in front of them. We had a circumstance where a driver got disoriented, followed an airport vehicle, and drove right onto the runway."

He grew up in Carriere, Miss., a city of 13,000 about 60 miles northeast of New Orleans, "a place with a two-way street, a post office and a high school," said Sims.

He met his wife, the former Heather Erdman, in Mason City when she also worked at the airport. They now live in Clear Lake.

"We love being near the lake," he said. "I'm used to being on the water. My parents had me on a sailboat when I was just a couple of months old."

What brought a man from the warm climate of Mississippi to a place like Iowa where the winters can be brutal?

"The job," Sims says with a laugh.

"I think since I've been here, we've had the coldest, snowiest winters. So nobody can tell me, 'You should have been here when...,' because I feel like I have been."

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