

Landenberg Life

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Drones drive new enterprise

As a kid, Chris Abt loved to watch airplanes. Now he has his own fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles.

**By Ken Mammarella
Contributing Writer**

Chris Abt's hoped-for second career is up in the air. Literally, with drones.

The Landenberg resident, who has worked in information technology for 25 years, created ZigZag Aerial LLC in 2022.

His startup offers 2D and 3D mapping, flyovers, interior first-person views and other aerial imaging, via drones. "There's a drone for that," he writes on www.zigzagaerial.us, "and we have you covered."

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Crossan Park, as seen by ZigZag.



Milburn Orchards, as seen by ZigZag.

All images courtesy of ZigZag Aerial LLC.
Chris Abt and the drone he calls Big Geek. The Landenberg resident has created a drone business called ZigZag Aerial LLC.

Drones

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"Flying is the easy part," he said in an interview, speculating that he spends 80 percent of his ZigZag work in post-production to craft tightly edited and visually arresting videos with evocative soundtracks. And since he's a composer, he contemplates writing his own music for future videos.

Although the business is still part-time for him and only occasionally uses the help of a few others, he is also thinking very big. The merch page of his website sells more than 30 items, from a \$9.99 mug to a \$139.99 comforter, with drone imagery and the company logo. He's also identified a potential business in creating a line of equipment for drone companies, plus clothing sporting industry slogans.

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Abt said that he spends 80 percent of his drone work in post-production, and only 20 percent actually flying drones.

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Drones

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It all goes back to a lifelong interest in plane spotting.

A lifelong interest in flight

Abt grew up in Landenberg, and the family later moved to Delaware County. He returned to Landenberg at about the time he started ZigZag, to be closer to family (his sisters are now in Oxford and West Grove and his mother lives in Newark).

"Flight has been an interest of mine for years. Ever since I was little, I liked going to airports. I always wanted to know where people were going," he said, recalling trips to Philadelphia International Airport with his grandfather. That hobby, unfortunately, became less appealing following all the restrictions started after the 9/11 terrorism attacks in 2001.

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Abt sends a drone out over Crossan Park.

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Drones

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His interest also led him to getting a job fueling jets. That gig ended after three weeks, the day some tanks fell over.

"I was scared to death, and I never went back," he said. "I considered learning how to fly but I could not afford the lessons at the time."

In 2006, the Federal Aviation Administration issued the first permit for commercial drones, and he noticed drone businesses start up and friends using drones to enhance their photography.

So in 2021, Abt took an online course – the FAA requires training for anyone flying drones commercially – and aced the FAA's in-person course at Brandywine Regional Airport in West Goshen. He was now certified.

Flying, it turns out, is not that easy. Drones can't go into closed airspace – like near airports or President Joe Biden's Delaware home – and other rules cover flights over crowds and at night. Drones can't go above 400 feet – unless they're mapping the exterior of very tall buildings. Drones can't get too close to clouds.

"So many rules," he acknowledged. "There's really a lot to know."



ZigZag's fleet

Over the last year, Abt has established a fleet of drones, with varied specialties, like different golf clubs in a set. They have FAA registration numbers ("like license plates"), but Abt has given most nicknames: Big Geek, Little Geek, Cousin Geek and Tiny Geek form one quartet. He also pilots Moongoat FPV, Avata FPV and Avata Goggles (FPV is first-person view; goggles refer to the goggles that he wears when piloting it; Avata and Moongoat are brands).

Abt is building the business with training and networking from the Oxford Area Chamber of Commerce, and he also has a mentor from SCORE, the nation's largest network of volunteer business experts, united in a program partly funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

He is a big fan of the online classes for creatives on skillshare.com.

"I'm on there a lot, constantly taking in information and learning new tricks in editing," he said. "You want to be a little bit different than anyone else and try to do

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Abt with some of the fleet (from left to right):
Cousin Geek, Moongoat FPV, Big Geek, Avata Goggles and Avata FPV.



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September 8, 9, 10: Grandparents Weekend
September 15, 16, 17: Fall Speed Ahead
September 22, 23, 24: Milburn's Anniversary Party
Sept. 29, 30, Oct. 1: Apple Harvest Celebration
October 6, 7, 8: Pumpkin Harvest Celebration
October 13, 14, 15: Farm Fun Family Weekend
October 20, 21, 22: Autumn Colors Weekend
October 27, 28, 29: Trick-or-Treat Weekend
November 3, 4, 5: Last Call for Fall

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Sunset over Landenberg, as seen by ZigZag.

different things. Different cuts, different angles, different something. Anything that's different. People don't want to watch the same thing over and over again."

Abt said that he has received logo design and graphics advice from his son, Jadeon, as well as the persistence to both fly drones and spend hours editing the images they create.

His other help has been from Laura D'Ascenzo, a friend who sometimes assists in filming as his visual observer. The FAA requires the drone to be in the constant line of sight of the remote pilot in command, or the sight is handed off to the visual observer. That observer is also required when flying first-person videos, since the pilot is wearing goggles and "has no situational awareness."

Out in the wild blue yonder

Abt's first client was a horse farm that also ran an airbnb. Another early video was for Milburn Orchards in Cecil County.

"People loved seeing our farm from a unique perspective," said Olivia Palmeri, marketing manager for the operation, which has its own drone. "The Milburn family and our employees are already wondering when he is returning again so we can see more of these great views during our different growing seasons and seasonal events."

Abt has also created multiple videos for Franklin Township, showcasing its parks and preserves.

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"You can walk, play or just peacefully chillax," he wrote last November on ZigZag's Facebook page, with a drone video of Crossan Park.

"People love it," Jeff Eastburn, the township's operations manager said of Abt's drone artistry, done pro bono to build ZigZag's business and help the community. "We've had a great reaction, and it's brought more attention to our parks. It's a new, neat perspective, and we're extremely happy."

"We see this as an attention-getter but also as something for grant cycles to show the county and the state what we have done," he added.

"Progress videos are a great way to monitor overall growth, or loss in any given situation," Abt writes on his website. In the interview, he talked about

both growth and loss.

Last fall, he filmed a tree planting in Crossan Park, and he wants to return years from now to capture the trees' growth – and the success of the volunteers' effort.

The loss can be sad, and it can also be hopeful.

"When you get a drone in it at 200 feet, with 4K video, you can see the names of the books owned by children that were killed in a devastating hurricane," he said. Such footage might encourage more donations to help devastated families, he said, and in a similar way he would like his drones to help search-and-rescue missions succeed.



Abt has also created a line of clothing and other items with drone slogans.

To learn more about ZigZag Aerial LLC, visit zigzagaerial.us or email chris@zigzagaerial.us.

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