

Aluminum Can Built Mini Max by David Letting



In his 82 years of life, Ron Detert has not gone a day without longing to be airborne. In his own words, "I am 82 years old, and still anxious to fly!" However, life has not always dealt Ron the cards needed to own a personal airplane and become a pilot. But with the help of some ingenious fundraising, EAA Ultralight Chapter 75, EAA Chapter 640, and the rest of the Wausau aviation community, Ron has been able to chase his lifelong dream.

In 2002, he decided it was time to begin down the path of owning his own airplane. However, with an ill wife at home and limited funds, Ron thought to himself, "I have to build my own, but how?" He settled on building his own MiniMax, but was in need of more money and resources.

Shortly after the bench for the build was ready, Bill Markstrum, EAA 90501, a fellow member of Ultralight Chapter 75, was at a family reunion when he noticed all

of the attendees throwing away their used aluminum cans. Bill decided he would start saving his aluminum cans so that Ron could turn them in for credit to fund his MiniMax.

In the early stages of the can saving Syd Cohen, EAA Lifetime 98446, offered the garbage barrels in his hangar as a collection point for the cans. As the word of Ron's aluminum can fundraiser began to spread, Syd's hangar became the dumping ground for aluminum cans collected by the Wausau Airport community, Chapter 640, and Ultralight Chapter 75.

As soon as the eight barrels in Syd's hanger were full, Ron would make a trip to the local scrap facility. On a typical visit, Ron would make roughly \$20 to \$30, which he immediately put toward aircraft parts. Once the parts were ordered, he would work on his MiniMax until he was able to make another trip to the scrap yard. Little by little,

Ron made progress on his project. Even if it was just a \$30 purchase of AN bolts here or a \$28 purchase of wood there.

While the fundraising continued, Ron started to get larger donations. There would be days he would show up to the airport, and there would be four or five bags of aluminum cans stacked outside of Syd's hangar. Pilots from far northern Wisconsin would load up their aircraft with garbage bags full of aluminum cans, and fly down to Wausau just to donate the cans to the project. Steve Kruger, president of Ultralight Chapter 55, even donated the scrap aluminum from his Quicksilver MX so that Ron could have the funds from that scrap. Ron described the kindness of these donations as, "The EAA spirit, we are here to help one another, whether we are friends or strangers."

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Perhaps the biggest donations to the project did not come in the form of aluminum. One afternoon, Bill was visiting Ron's residence to inspect the progress on the aircraft. After examining some of the drill holes that Ron had completed, Bill knew they would

not suffice. "Oh my, those drillings are too elongated." The words that Ron feared, as he was using a used drill press that his wife has purchased him at a garage sale.

The next morning, there was a knock on the door. Bill was back, but with a surprise. He insisted that Ron go around to the back of his truck and open it up. There it sat, a brand new drill press. Ron got back to work.

Working with limited funds and an out of date drill press were not the only hurdles that Ron had to clear. Ron was working out of his garage at home; a small, unheated, one-car garage, in north central Wisconsin. This forced Ron to complete much of his work during the period from April to October.

To continue his work, even when temperatures dropped below 72 degrees, Ron cre-



ated his own temperature-controlled area. While blowing warm air into his workspace, he would enclose the area with cardboard to keep the temperature at a consistent.

Ron continued to chip away at his MiniMax until 2013 when his wife succumbed to her illness. During this time, he took a rather lengthy break from building but the itch to finish his project would not stay away for long.

As Ron got back to work on the airplane, the project became more financially stable, allowing him to work at a quicker pace. At this point, Ron knew it was time to pass along his "Aluminum Can Airplane Fund Enterprise," as he called his unique fundraiser, to another deserving builder.

It did not take long for Ron to find the next candidate: Jack Lasee of Mosinee, Wisconsin, is 18 years old and, as is the case with many folks at this age, the financial barrier is one of the biggest hurdles to clear when building an airplane.

Jack started his project, a Pietenpol, when he was 15 years old and has since nearly finished the fuselage and tail feathers; both sections just need to be covered.

As for Ron's MiniMax, he completed the project in summer of 2016 with roughly 15 percent of the cost having been covered by aluminum can donations. Since Ron will operate his MiniMax under FAR Part 103 and has not had much flight training recently, he did not want to conduct the first flight. In his place, Steve Krueger, president of EAA Ultralight Chapter 75, made the first flight on August 8, 2016.

Steve, a CFI and the proud owner of an Aeronca Champ, has agreed to give Ron the flight training necessary to safely operate his MiniMax. "Steve said that he will not even let me taxi the MiniMax until he's satisfied with my

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skills in his Champ, which I agree with wholeheartedly because EAA is all about safety, safety, safety," Ron said.

Ron's MiniMax project is not the only one in the history of homebuilt aircraft to be funded by such a unique fundraiser, and it will not be the last. However, to Ron it represents exactly what EAA stands

for. He could not express enough that without the support and knowledge of his fellow EAA chapter members, his project would have never made it to the sky. Ron wants aspiring builders and pilots to know that all it takes is "desire, perseverance, love, and the EAA spirit" to make your aviation dream become a reality.

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