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FEATURE ARTICLE

Curating Curiosity with New Curator Matthew Burchette

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Since Dan Hagedorn stepped down and retired as the senior curator in 2016, The Museum of Flight has been searching for the right person to fill his shoes—someone who is incredibly knowledgeable and passionate about aerospace, but also who is intensely curious about the world and will thrive at the Museum.

Matthew Burchette previously worked at the Wings Over the Rockies Air and Space Museum in Denver, Colorado for nearly 15 years, and his friends and family describe him as a “quirky history geek.” He is probably best known as the host and curator of the Behind the Wings video series on YouTube; his videos portray him as relatable, enthusiastic and recognizable. “Behind the Wings was so much fun, especially how it resonates with kids,” says Matthew. “People would come to the museum because they want to try and meet me, people stopped me in stores. It has done wonders for [Wings Over the Rockies] by drawing people in and increasing our social presence.”

Matthew grew up in Texas, where his parents helped him cultivate an appreciation for history and art. As a child, he would go to church every Sunday and read the books in the library. “The library had a pretty good section on military history,” says Matthew. “I remember poring over these books on the air wars, I knew them backwards and forwards.” His parents would also take him to the natural history museum in Austin, where they would spend “umpteen bazillion hours looking at the dioramas of history through the ages.” Matthew’s dad started taking him out west to Santa Fe every summer to expand the range of their museum visits.

Matthew first studied interior design at Baylor University because it was the closest thing to architecture that the school offered. “My mom had said, ‘They have museum studies, you would like that!’ But as a teenager I wasn’t too enthused with the idea,” he says. Matthew worked as a graphic artist after graduation, but it just didn’t feel like a good match for a lifelong

career. He decided to return to Baylor and remembered his mom’s words about museum studies. Matthew says, “I’ve always been interested in history. I look to the past instead of the future.”

As he was completing his museum studies undergrad courses, Baylor launched its graduate program; Matthew was one of the first students to earn a Master’s degree in Museum Administration from the school. The Governor Bill and Vara Daniel Historic Village, a Civil War-era living history museum, was established on the school’s campus while Matthew was there. “I was studying Civil War history at the time and I told my supervisor, I’d love to do restoration work out there,” Matthew says. “I learned blacksmithing and historic carpentry, it was awesome!”

Matthew was offered a job as a project manager at Southwest Museum Services, a company that designs museum exhibits. While there, he worked on a little bit of everything: researching artifacts for exhibit use, photographing items for their database, writing exhibit descriptions and developing project schedules. Needless to say, these many skills and interests are excellent qualities for a curator overseeing a team of creative individuals, enabling them to jump in and help whenever necessary. “I get to do a lot of fun things that many people don’t get to do,” Matthew says.

“There’s an amazing history attached to aviation. In your own plane, the world is literally yours. The kind of freedom that aviation gives you—you can literally decide on a whim to go anywhere.” Many people take for granted how incredible modern flight is because they are too preoccupied with standing in the TSA line, taking off their shoes or sitting next to a stranger who won’t stop talking. “What people don’t realize is how much general aviation contributes to the United States economy and what it accomplishes.”

As the first professional curator at Wings Over the Rockies, Matthew is incredibly proud

of what he accomplished there. He wrote a \$200,000 grant to replace the roof of an old 1938 hangar and worked with the Colorado Historical Society to restore it to the original 1930’s look. “Projects like this to improve the structure of the museum...they start to tell a story,” Matthew says. “I left the museum a much better place than I found it.”

When I spoke with Matthew, he was driving his car from Denver to Salt Lake City, excited to start a new chapter in his life. He had been preoccupied with packing up his house and moving, but he’s definitely ready to embrace the Pacific Northwest lifestyle: “I’m a bike rider, and I’m excited to take up kayaking again,” Matthew says. “One of the first things I’m going to do is climb Mount St. Helens, since I figured out you can actually climb the thing!” He loves seafood, especially Copper River Salmon, and is looking forward to all of the craft breweries that Seattle offers.

And the new senior curator’s timing couldn’t be better, as The Museum of Flight is starting to plan our exhibits and programs around the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II coming up in 2020. Matthew is part of a historical reenactment group that meets up to follow the same route that the Second Armored Division took through Europe during World War II. “We slept in foxholes, it was really awesome!” Matthew says. “These guys are great; I have friends literally across the globe because of it.” Matthew will be overseeing the development of new content that will be installed in the J. Elroy McCaw Personal Courage Wing next year, “I’d love to talk about the WASPS, the Night Witches from Russia, and test pilot Hanna Reitsch.”

“To me, the thing that captures the imagination is the sheer freedom that you have to do whatever you want,” says Matthew. “I am humbled to be selected as the curator of such an amazing facility.”

OPPOSITE: New Curator Matthew Burchette laughs for the camera in front of his favorite plane in the Collection, the Vought (XF-8A) XF8U-1 Crusader.
CREDIT: JACQIE CALLAHAN