

FRONT PAGE

# Pilot takes first solo flight in two-seat aircraft she built with her dad

By [Lauren French](#)

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MENOMONIE — Danielle Olson watched the clouds ahead of her on May 29, their shapes dark and hanging low.

Below her, the Menomonie Municipal Airport grew smaller as she climbed higher into the air. Turbulent winds gave the 16-year-old some jitters.

Flying is a way of life for Danielle, whose first of countless experiences in a plane came when she was just 5 weeks old. But this flight was different: The frequent flyer was piloting alone for the first time and in a two-seat aircraft she built with her dad.

“I’ve flown in other planes, and it’s just another plane. But this one, I built,” Danielle said at her family’s hangar, the RV14 resting on the runway behind her. “I riveted those rivets. It’s cool that I made a plane, and I’m flying it by myself.”

Student pilots must be at least 16 years old to fly solo, and Danielle made sure she was ready as soon as possible. By the time she turned 16, she had met all the requirements to fly alone and was in the air the morning of her birthday, a feat flight instructors say is rare. But leading up to that moment, Danielle already had a lifetime of flying experiences and years of building a plane under her belt.

## ‘Never known not flying’

When Danielle was an infant, her parents loaded her into a car seat with an overhead layer of foam wrapped in a bath towel to protect her small ears from the roar of the plane’s engine and took flight. Before that, Tim and Andrea Olson did the same thing with Danielle’s older sister, Colleen.

“She’s never known not flying,” Andrea said, watching as Tim and Danielle posed for photos with the plane they built together.

Danielle, Colleen and their parents used every opportunity to take the family’s home-built, four-seat plane around the U.S. and beyond. By the time Danielle was 11, the family had traveled to all 50 states. In their experience as flyers, the family has also traveled to the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Canada and Mexico.

As time went by and the kids outgrew their car seats, Danielle and Colleen tottered around the plane as young children. Danielle said she fondly remembers climbing up front on cross-country flights and sleeping in her dad’s lap when the wind was calm and the ride was smooth as glass.

Danielle was only 5 or 6 years old when she fully realized she loved to fly, she said. She was still too short to see over the panel, but Tim sat her in his lap, pointed to one of the plane’s screens and showed her how to direct the aircraft.

“Dad said, ‘Just fly through the green boxes,’ ” Danielle said. “I just did that the whole time, and that was when I first realized this is something I can do, not just sit in the back and ride along.”

Tim, whose interest in flying extends back to when he was a small child, learned how to fly in his early 30s. He wanted to give his kids a chance to learn and figured the family’s four-seat plane wasn’t the best model in which to do that, he said.

“I knew the kids were growing up,” he said, “and it was kind of heartbreaking because I knew I didn’t have much time left with them to do what I wanted to do. And I wanted them to be able to learn how to fly.”

So, why not build their own two-seat plane together?

## Building, learning

Between 2013 and 2016, the Olson family was busy assembling the RV14 kit, working full-time jobs, going to school and for Danielle, also learning the essentials of flying.

Building their two-seater was no easy task, Tim said — at some points of the build he estimated he and Danielle were spending 30 hours a week on their project. And a lot of the time, Danielle said, the work was challenging and monotonous.

“You couldn’t picture it at times,” Danielle said as she contemplated the building process. “There are all these parts, and you couldn’t picture it as an actual thing you can fly.”

It helped to get the body of the plane together so she could better imagine what she was working toward, Danielle said, and to take the family’s four-seater for a fly with her mom or dad. The best part about the build, Danielle said, was painting the plane after they finished assembling.

“There are some drips and mess ups if you look close,” Danielle said, “but it’s cool because we did it ourselves.”

When the plane was finished in June of last year, Tim immediately took Danielle and their plane to the sky. Tim obtained his official instructor’s license in January, and his daughter became his first student.

Danielle plans to obtain her private pilot license when she turns 17, the minimum age for that license. Between now and then, she’ll spend time racking up the hours of flight required for her license.

In the state of Wisconsin, an estimated 3,409 people have active private pilot licenses as of December 2016, according to data from the Federal Aviation Administration. Of those license holders, only 194 are women.

Danielle has already accomplished an unusual amount in the world of aviation by flying solo for the first time at 16, said Mike Jacobs, a certified flight instructor for Wisconsin Aviation.

“It’s not very common that it happens at that age at all,” Jacobs said, noting that it takes most people between 20 and 25 hours of training to be ready for a solo flight. “Very few people solo in the teens.”

## Flying solo

The night before Danielle’s first solo flight, she couldn’t sleep.

Fears of the airplane stalling midair and plummeting to the ground plagued her mind. In all her 16 years of being in planes, that scenario had never happened — it hadn’t even come close to happening. But her dad had always been there while she learned to fly, she said, and the thought of flying without him was uncomfortable.

“With my dad in the plane, I knew that no matter how badly I messed up, he’d be able to fix it and land the plane safely,” she said. “So when I was with myself, I had to be more cautious because if something went wrong, I couldn’t rely on him.”

Stronger winds the day of her flight made Danielle a bit nervous, she said, but once she got going instinct settled in and she almost forgot she was alone. A moment of peace struck her when she saw a break in the dark clouds to the east, sunlight streaming through the opening.

“You could see the rays,” Danielle said, noting a church sermon about signs of God in everyday life her family heard the day before. “Being a religious person, I was like, ‘Oh, God’s here! I’m good.’ ”

After that, Danielle safely landed the plane and took off twice more.

While some parents may cringe at the thought of letting their child fly alone in an aircraft they built at home — especially in light of the Chetek teen who died in an airplane crash May 24 — Tim and Andrea said they felt the RV14 is safe. After all, they know that plane inside and out.

“We can’t let (news of a fatal crash) stop us,” Andrea said, “because flying is something we love.”

Contact: 715-830-5828, [lauren.french@ecpc.com](mailto:lauren.french@ecpc.com), @LaurenKFrench on Twitter

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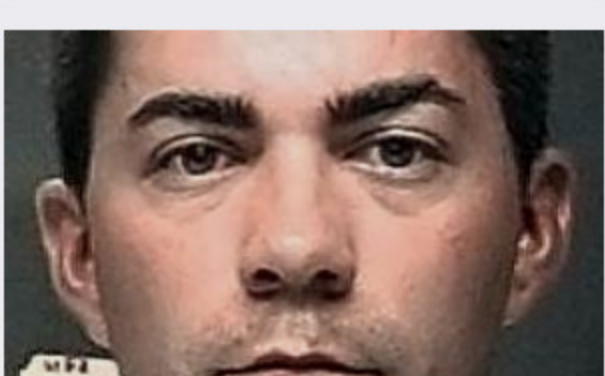
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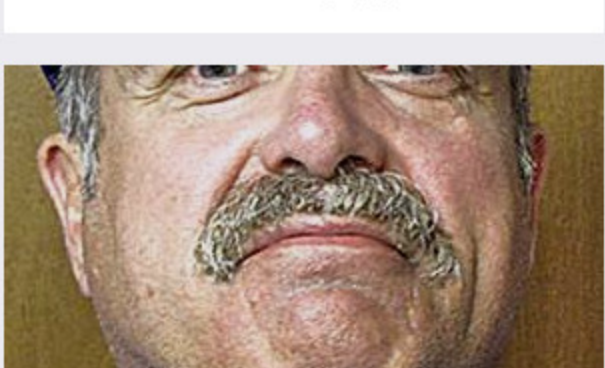
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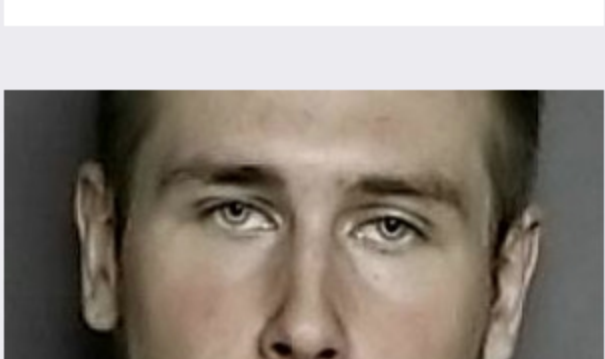
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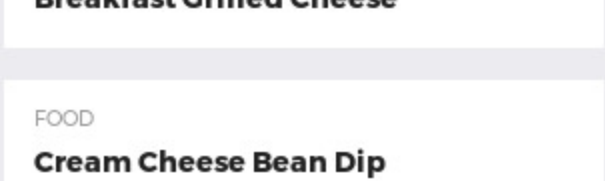
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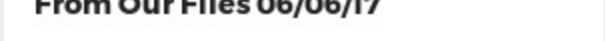
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