

# Nicole PIASECKI

## Parlaying Family Traditions

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*This Boeing Company V.P.  
comes from a  
distinguished line of  
engineers and  
entrepreneurs.*



**F**rank Piasecki, the son of Polish immigrants, has a strong work ethic, and an authoritarian nature. He has been described as plucky, persistent, a genius, a hero, and an intrepid entrepreneur—not to mention aviation pioneer and one of the founding fathers of the modern heli-

copter. In 1943, as an aeronautical engineering student at the University of Pennsylvania, Frank Piasecki and a few friends designed and built a helicopter, and Frank was the first to fly it. This helicopter, the PV-2, was the second successful helicopter flight in the United States, and now hangs at the National Air and Space Museum's new companion facility at Dulles Airport, the Udvar-Hazy. The Piasecki Aircraft Corp. is still innovating rotary wing technology, and the 83-year-old Piasecki patriarch still goes to work every day. Two of Piasecki's brothers also work at the company.

Vivian Piasecki is a member of the Weyerhaeuser family, and exhibits an

overwhelming dedication to education and philanthropy, as well as elegant tastes. She has been described as a woman of loyalty, strength, integrity, generosity, and vision—not to mention a model mother-in-law.

Nicole Piasecki is a blend of the best of these two outstanding parents. Like her father, she earned a degree in engineering, is a pilot, and has been working in the aviation industry nearly all her career. Like her mother, she broadened her horizons and developed her business skills. "Dad wanted all of us in the family business. His advice was that if we wanted to be ensured a job we should get technical

degrees," Nicole said. "But my mother encouraged us to also seek a broader education and a breadth of opportunities. She encouraged us to travel and see the world, and work in other places."

Piasecki parlayed that portfolio into a career at The Boeing Company, which she joined in 1991. Now Vice President of Business Strategy and Marketing in the Commercial Airplanes division, Piasecki is the highest-ranking woman in that unit directly involved with strategy for the organization's products and services.

"I create marketing strategies to capture business," she said. "Also products

**by Kathleen M. Hanser**

and services strategies—helping us decide which product we should be investing R&D in. We have to understand what the airlines need, what the market requirements are now and in the future."

Although only 39 years old at the time of her promotion in 2002—a critical time in the aerospace industry—no one could

argue that the path leading Piasecki to that point hadn't equipped her with the perfect set of personal traits and technical qualifications to succeed.

For one, she already had a reputation for being a workaholic. This strong work ethic began developing at the tender age of three, when she and her older sister, Lynn, would go to work at Piasecki Aircraft Corp. with their father on Saturday mornings. At first, Piasecki remembers clearly, her father would ask them to draw pictures. "He would then give us from one to five stars for the drawing," she said. "Then we grew into sweeping the floor, making sandwiches for the employees, typing, and photography—as we grew up in age the tasks would change."

After Lynn and Nicole, five boys joined the family, and they, too, spent Saturdays working with their father. This was one of the aspects of their life that made the seven siblings realize their father was a unique character.

Piasecki notes another aspect of her childhood that helped shape her, "We often had international business people at our house, and we would often go with my Dad down to the Pentagon or

to senators' offices where he would pitch his latest proposal." Thus she became comfortable with people from an early age, learned the value of social and business networking, and how to talk to people. This is invaluable in Piasecki's present position, where she interfaces with many constituencies.

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Piasecki's husband, Peter Heymann, calls her "very relationship-focused." He credits this to her mother's wisdom in that area. "Nicole saw it was of critical importance to develop working relationships with as many people as you can." Her mother is a leader in Philadelphia-area charitable circles, and recently became one of the driving forces behind the National Constitution Center, a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing public understanding of, and appreciation for, the Constitution.

The advice and examples her parents gave her, and Piasecki's shrewd accep-

ting them, gave her the kind of academic and international experience global aerospace conglomerates like Boeing are looking for.

"I went into Yale thinking I'd go into law eventually, even though I was studying engineering," Piasecki said. "I knew my mind wasn't naturally attracted to

solving mechanical problems. It was attracted to how to do things more efficiently, relationships with people, profitability, the business end. I knew I had math and engineering capabilities, but not the passion." Toward her junior and senior year, Piasecki decided engineering was what she wanted to major and graduate in but what she really wanted to do in her career was business. So she worked for a few years before heading to graduate school. "I wanted to get some plain work experience to solidify my thinking," she said.

Piasecki had job offers from both Boeing and Sikorsky, her father's chief rival, and she set her sights on Sikorsky. "It was like going over to the enemy from my father's perspective," she said.

So she worked out a plan for winning his approval. "You always had to give my father a good rationale for doing things," she said. She explained to her father that the experiences she would have at a larger company, where she could develop a range of skills and build a lot of relationships, would eventually be good for Piasecki Aircraft. "He accepted that rationale and accepted my working at Sikorsky," Piasecki said.

Thus, Piasecki's first job in aerospace was at United Technologies Sikorsky Aircraft Division, where she worked as an engineer for four years. Following that, she earned a master's in business administration at the prestigious Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. At Wharton, she became one of three students selected to study Japanese business practices at the Keio Business School in Yokohama, Japan. This



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fit perfectly with her plan to gain broad experience and make herself more attractive in the job market.

This led to a job doing business development and marketing with Weyerhaeuser in Japan, where she stayed for two years. Eventually, she began to miss the aviation business. "I realized aviation was my true dream," she said.

The people at Boeing advised her that she had better get back into engineering "because anybody who's anybody at Boeing is an engineer." Piasecki made the bold move of accepting a 50 percent pay cut and joined Boeing in 1991 as a customer engineer in the budding 777 Division. Her job involved working with the customer and configuring the airplane to their requirements. "It was a jolt for me to be back doing engineering after being away for several years," Piasecki recalls.

In 1993 Piasecki was promoted to director of sales operations, where customer commitments for deliveries are allocated and translated into production plans. Then she served as the sales director responsible for eastern Canada-

based carriers and leasing companies. Following that, she was vice president of Commercial Airplanes Sales, Leasing Companies for nearly two years. In this position, she was responsible for the Boeing business relationships with all airplane leasing companies worldwide, including the sale and marketing of all commercial airplanes and aircraft services to leasing firms.

Piasecki carries a lot of weight on her shoulders since the tragedies of 9/11 threw the airline industry into disarray. "The industry environment is horrific right now," she said. "But this is a long-term industry and we know it goes in cycles. I'm a 'glass-half-full' person, and I have the confidence that comes from knowing this industry so well and how it works."

A tall, lean woman who wears fashionable business clothing at work, Piasecki's personal style does not include nail polish, lots of flashy jewelry or extravagant hairstyles, and she wears minimal make-up. She exudes calm confidence, listens intently when people talk, and the one word everyone

uses when describing her is "energetic."

Family, athletics and flying have kept Piasecki busy when she's not at work. She started flying when she was 16 and got her pilot's certificate in 1984. She learned in a Piper Tomahawk and now flies primarily Cessna 172s, although her hectic schedule and her two young children have interfered with her flying. "This is a great place to fly, of course, with the San Juan Islands and all, and I'm sure when the children get older I'll start flying again," she said.

Piasecki has never been bothered by the supposed "good old boy" network. "In a way, I started working at the age of three in aerospace and early on I learned to discount the unimportant and move on," she said. "It has not been my personal experience that the organization created any barriers for me. In fact, my career has been based primarily on men supporting me. Yet I can acknowledge that everyone has their own set of experiences." →

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*Kathleen M. Hanser is an aviation writer and editor in Washington, D.C.*