

Nicole PIASECKI

Parlaying Family Traditions

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



Frank 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-

tance of 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



PHOTOS BY MEG GODLEWSKI