

## Interview with Richard Hodkinson

By Jacqui Dres

*Richard is a pilot and former CEO of Elite Aviation, an aircraft management and charter company he founded in 1994. At the time he sold the company in 2006, he had 156 employees and did around 28 million a year in gross sales.*



Highland Hall Alum, Richard Hodkinson, Class of '82

### ***Tell me about Elite Aviation, the company you founded?***

At Elite we bought and sold private jets and provided turn key flight departments to jet aircraft owners. Our clients were typically Fortune 500 companies and highly successful individuals. They could make a call to us, tell us when and where they needed to go, and we'd handle all the details from there. We'd hire and manage the crews, hangar the aircraft, provide the maintenance...it was an all encompassing service. We also offered charter services on those same aircraft when the owner wasn't using them. The charter revenue significantly lowered the cost of ownership for our customers.

### ***How did you get into the field of aviation?***

I started flying while I was still at Highland Hall. I was 14 years old. There was a promo for \$13 to fly three times around the Burbank airport traffic pattern with a flight instructor. I coaxed my dad into taking me out there one Saturday to do the demo flight. I thought it was really fun and I realized that wow-- people actually get paid to do this. So, I told my parents I wanted to be a pilot. Of course I didn't know at that time all the various places a career in aviation could or might take me. At first my folks were really skeptical because of my age and the significant expense, but after I got a job washing airplanes at the airport on weekends in exchange for flight time they knew I was serious.

So I flew all through high school. I graduated Highland Hall on a Friday and started a job the following Monday flying a single engine prop plane for a guy that needed a part time pilot. When I wasn't flying I would do other things for his company. I did that for about a year and a half during which time I also took some aviation management courses at Glendale College and then got a full time job working as a pilot. I've been in aviation ever since.

### ***So, can you tell me about your experience at Highland Hall?***

I started in Kindergarten and I went all the way through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I was at Highland Hall for 14 years. My parents were small business owners and ran a family business that manufactured car polish. Both my parents worked and my mom was very concerned about what to do with me when it was time for me to go to school. At the time our public school wasn't very good and there were big bussing issues back then and a lot of controversy about all that. An advertisement came in the mail about Highland Hall and my mom was immediately drawn to it because she is German and she saw that it was a Waldorf school based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. She and I went out to the school for a tour and that was that.

### ***Do you recall anything unique or special about your education?***

I recall doing our main lesson books. We had to write them and do our own illustrations, something that was incomprehensible to my friends who went to public school. I also had a lot of different types of classes. I enjoyed the geometric drawing classes, woodworking and pottery classes. I still have things I made in those classes to this day.

***Do you think you have any special gifts or talents that you can attribute to your experience at Highland Hall?***

I think that my interest in music is probably more keen because of my experience in a Waldorf school. I made the mistake of singing a little too loudly in choir and it was discovered that I could sing, so I was cast as the lead in the play and had to do a solo. I always had terrible stage fright, but I learned that I could do it and so, to this day, I enjoy singing in social groups and occasionally do some karaoke for fun.

My sense of who I am and my understanding of things were also influenced by the education at Highland Hall. The artistic classes, such as pottery or woodworking, are more important than just learning those talents. The creative process continues when you're outside working together on a project; you're able to carry on conversations with other students and you develop friendships. You're also more social with the teachers than in a structured class. I think that it's a very positive cultural experience.

***What are your plans for the future?***

I plan on continuing to invest and develop aviation real estate, such as hanger-office buildings and facilities that handle transient aircraft at airports. In the next few years there will be more and more airplanes built, but fewer airports, so I see a huge upside in this business. By July I will have a more defined path, or flight plan if you will. I enjoy aircraft sales and there is a strong likelihood that whatever I do will involve some aircraft sales whether as a side thing or a primary focus.

***Have you enjoyed your free time since leaving Elite?***

Yes, I have a great deal. It has been a real learning experience because I have had time to reflect on what is important and more importantly what isn't. I have seen relationships change as a result of me no longer being the President and CEO of Elite Aviation. I haven't always enjoyed the lesson or process, but the result is that I have a lot better focus on what I want out of the second half of my life and, more importantly, who I want to share it with.

***Any closing thoughts?***

I have been to the last two High School graduations at Highland Hall, which were great. In both cases I went home having more hope for the future. Those great young people that I saw graduate gave that hope to me. Highland Hall is a great foundation for our future.