

Blaine Jones - Thunderbirds

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Soaring through the air.” That’s what happens when a collegiate high jumper makes his or her jump, but today we’ll meet a man from rural Kansas who has taken this idea to a whole new level. Thanks to writer Amber N. Helm whose article in the Kingman Leader-Courier was the basis for this story. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Blaine Jones grew up on a farm in south central Kansas and attended grade school at the rural community of Pretty Prairie, population 610 people. Now, that’s rural. He graduated from Kingman High School where he became an accomplished high jumper and started soaring through the air. He attended Hutchinson Community College and Kansas State University on track scholarships and was a three-time All-American high jumper.

Blaine followed in the footsteps of his uncle who graduated from KSU and his aunt who worked in the food industry. He obtained a degree in bakery science and management at Kansas State, graduating in 1996.

As an intern for Kellogg’s, Blaine did product development. He then worked for a bakery in Baltimore, Maryland for a couple of years before returning to Kansas City to work as an assistant production manager for a large bakery.

In September of 2001, some key events changed his life. The first was watching the Thunderbirds, which is an elite U.S Air Force fighter pilot squadron. Seeing them perform maneuvers during their show inspired him to go to a local airport on Sept. 8 and sign up for flight lessons, something he had always been interested in but had never tried. The experience changed Jones’ life. “It was awesome, it was the greatest thing I’d ever done,” he said.

Three days later, Jones was at the bakery listening to the events of Sept. 11 unfold over the radio and he felt that up to that point he had been focused on himself. After hearing about the attacks on America, Blaine knew he wanted to join the military, to do something bigger. Since he liked flying, he sought out information about a career in the Air Force.

The summer before he left for officer training, he returned home to help his father during harvest, and he also used that time to improve his physical condition. “Between loads he’d be out there jogging beside the combine in his combat boots getting in shape,” said Blaine’s father, Jay Jones. “I’d open the window and holler out ‘Run, Forrest, Run!’”. Jones was one of the oldest in his class at officer training, but his track background and dedication to staying in shape allowed him to keep up with his younger classmates.

In 2002, Jones graduated from Air Force Officer Training School in Alabama and entered pilot training with the rank of Second Lieutenant. It was there he met and married his wife, Carey, a fellow pilot.

Blaine and Carey made Air Force history when they became the first married couple to fly an alert practice scramble mission with their F-15C fighter jets. The Jones also have twin 2-year-old girls named Jett and Tally.

Blaine was promoted to the rank of Captain and served five years at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. He was also deployed to Guam and the United Arab Emirates. Jones has logged more than 1,300 flight hours as an Air Force pilot. Wow.

In 2011, Jones was selected to fly with the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron (also known as the Thunderbirds) after a rigorous application and interview process that included shadowing the Thunderbird pilots and interacting with crowd members.

In a typical year the Thunderbirds perform at more than 60 demonstrations in 33 locations, spending more than 200 days on the road. Each performance lasts more than an hour and showcases the skills and capabilities that fighter pilots must possess.

“Soaring through the air.” For Blaine, that idea was first applied in a Kansas high jump but it went on to become his career as a fighter pilot. We commend Blaine Jones for making a difference by serving his country and demonstrating these skills as an aviator. He has taken this idea to new heights.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.