

News

Sports

Autos

Business

Life

Entertainment

Opinion

USA Today

MORE: [Surviving Cancer: A special section](#) [Marathon](#) [eEdition](#) [Detroit bankruptcy](#)

Find what you are looking for ...

SEARCH

# The guy with the eye in the sky

As a traffic reporter and helicopter pilot, Plymouth man sees his job as a public service

Jun. 3, 2007 | 0 Comments



# GANNETT

It's all within reach.

LEARN MORE AT  
[GANNETT.COM](http://GANNETT.COM)

ADVERTISEMENT

Where once Dennis Neubacher, 54, of Plymouth was WJR-radio's traffic reporter in the sky, he now does the morning

drive-time report for WXYZ-TV Channel 7 -- from his office. As a pilot for McMahon Helicopters out of Mettetal Airport in Canton, Neubacher, with a videographer, flies wherever a camera in the sky is needed for news reports.

---

A A

---

FILED UNDER

[Community](#)

[CFP: Plymouth/Canton](#)

A helicopter pilot with acrophobia? A flyboy who can't stand at the edge of a tall building without panicking?

This is Dennis Neubacher, helicopter pilot extraordinaire, former traffic reporter for WJR-AM who now does the morning drive-time report for Channel 7.

Despite his fear of heights, he's never been afraid to go up in an airplane or helicopter. And he's been known to cure at least one person of his fear of falling.

The last time I saw Dennis was on July 24, 1986. He'd just landed WJR's Hughes 500 helicopter after an afternoon of traffic reporting aloft with me in the passenger seat as observer and, amazingly, adjunct pilot.

In those days, he was living in Dearborn, where he grew up the son of a Ford autoworker.

In those days, I didn't cover just Plymouth, Canton and Northville, as I do today. But, lucky for me I learned Dennis is living in Plymouth Township and flying from Mettetal Airport in Canton.

Things have changed mightily since I rode with him in 1986. A couple of years after our flight, he and wife, Karel, had a daughter, Tessa. And Dennis doesn't do air traffic reports now.

The advertisement is a vertical rectangular graphic. At the top, a woman in a dark grey business suit and high heels walks towards the right, carrying a yellow folder. Below her, the word "CareerBuilder" is written in orange. In the center, the word "GANNETT" is displayed in large, bold, blue capital letters, with the tagline "It's all within reach." underneath in a smaller, grey font. At the bottom, a man in a dark sweater and blue jeans stands looking at a tablet. Below him, the words "USA TODAY" are written in red. At the very bottom, the text "LEARN MORE AT GANNETT.COM" is written in blue.

ADVERTISEMENT

He's working for television. Few watch traffic reports in their cars; that's still radio's province. At WJR-AM, Joel Alexander still reports on traffic from a helicopter. But WJR, Alexander, J.P. McCarthy and Mitch Albom all are part of the reason why Dennis is working for Channel 7.

"About six months after J.P. died in 1995, they hired Mitch Albom to do the afternoon show. Joel Alexander was doing the afternoon show, and he had more seniority, so they put him in the helicopter and I was odd man out. For a short period, a couple of months, I was out of work," he explained.

Is Dennis bitter about being dumped by WJR? Hardly.


WJR put him in a helicopter, but that story really begins when he was a student at Western Michigan University. The manager of Western's WIDR student radio station told him, "Dennis, you have a nice-sounding voice. You ought to be doing news at WIDR. Come see me."

Dennis earned a bachelor's degree in communications and history at Western, taught high school speech and drama at Carson City, Mich., and worked for United Press International in New York and WTWR-FM in Detroit before he was hired as a reporter at WJR.

What management at 'JR didn't know was that Dennis got his private pilot's license in 1973 when he was 17.

Alexander was the drive-time helicopter traffic reporter when Dennis started at 760 AM. When the bosses assigned Alexander to be the afternoon host, they needed a pilot. Alexander mentioned that Dennis was a pilot. The station paid for his helicopter training.


#### Sponsored Links



**Travel Guard® Insurance**  
Get Travel Insurance Coverage for Your Vacation!  
[www.travelguard.com](http://www.travelguard.com)



**Looking to save money?**  
Switch early & save up to 10% with the Allstate Early Signing Discount  
[Allstate.com](http://Allstate.com)



**No Branches = Great Rates**  
High Yield CDs & Savings Accounts. 24/7 helpful customer service.  
[allybank.com](http://allybank.com)

ADVERTISEMENT

By that time, however, he was excited about reporting. "Now I get to do both."

He gave hundreds of people rides for WJR. Most memorable was the young man who assured Dennis he didn't get airsick -- and vomited all over the controls.

Today there are no more joyrides. Of course, it had never even once occurred to me that I might repeat my afternoon copter caper of '86. With the photographer aboard, along with his camera control equipment, there's no room for a third person. Not to mention the issue of liability in case of accident.

### **A busy life**

The day WJR sacked Dennis, Brian McMahon, owner of McMahon Helicopters at Mettetal Airport, called Dennis and said he was trying to work out a deal with Channel 7 for helicopter reporting.

Was Dennis interested? After a couple of months of freelancing as a pilot around Detroit, Dennis got a call from McMahon. In 1996, he was hired by Channel 7 as a reporter and McMahon as a pilot.

Dennis starts his day at 4:30 a.m., preparing traffic reports for Channel 7. He stays in his office, relying on traffic reporting networks and Michigan Department of Transportation video cameras for views of traffic conditions.

Traffic flow has changed, Dennis says. "Fewer people are going to Detroit. Now people are going to Ann Arbor, Troy, Warren, Rochester, Pontiac. The busiest freeway is I-275, that stretch between 5 Mile and M-14."

From 8 a.m., he's on call for McMahon. With a videographer, he flies wherever news organizations need cameras in the sky.

### **Breaking news**

The first time we were to meet last week, Dennis cancelled. He had to fly. School evacuations. Carjacking. Police chase.

After starting at 4:30 a.m., Dennis quits work around 6:30 p.m. -- 14 hours.

"I get tired of flying," he says. "I try to keep inspired, so when I come here I'm ready to go. But it does get a little tiring. It's a long day. I've had days when I've flown morning until night, five, six, seven times a day because of constant breaking stories."

But there are moments that are absolutely breathtaking. While flying over the Trenton Channel near Grosse Ile, he watched a bald eagle soaring nearby.

And the news is always different. He's convinced it's a public service. Still, he envies people in public office. He wants to give something to his community. Maybe serve on the township board.

At one point, he tried to run for political office, but was blocked by FCC broadcast rules.

"Seems discriminatory," he said, but the problem was that political opponents could demand equal time on the air, arguing that his daily exposure on radio or TV gave him an unfair advantage. The most satisfying thing he's done, he says, was being a high school teacher and giving flight lessons.

"I'm 54, and I'm feeling like, 'What's going to happen next? How do I follow this? I've never been to Africa, I've never been to South America. Will I get a chance to see them?' "

Is it true that he's afraid of heights?

"I won't go on roller coasters." He said, laughing. "You have to look down from the top, and I don't like doing that."

Contact **JOEL THURTELL** at 248-351-3296 or [thurtell@freepress.com](mailto:thurtell@freepress.com).

## NIGHTLIFE



Bacon Bash 2014

## SUBSCRIBE!



Sign up for home delivery today.

## MICHIGAN NEWS



**GANNETT**  
It's all within reach.  
LEARN MORE AT [GANNETT.COM](http://GANNETT.COM)

ADVERTISEMENT

---

**NEWS**

**SPORTS**

**AUTOS**

**BUSINESS**

**USA TODAY**

**FOLLOW US**

**LIFE**

**ENTERTAINMENT**

**OPINION**

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Mobile](#)

[RSS](#)

[E-mail Alerts](#)

---

[News](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Cars for Sale](#) | [Homes for Sale](#) | [Apartments for Rent](#) | [Shopping](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [E-Circulars](#) | [Daily Deals](#)



---

# GANNETT

Copyright © 2015 archive.freep.com. All rights reserved.

Users of this site agree to the [Terms of Service](#), [Privacy Notice/Your California Privacy Rights](#), and [Ad Choices](#)