

PRESIDENT TO PRESIDENT

Incident Action

by Dave Mathewson, AMA President

Between 12 columns each year for *Model Aviation* magazine, four for *Park Pilot* magazine, and six for the *AMA Insider*, I write 22 columns annually for AMA publications. In each of these columns I try to keep our members updated and informed about current issues affecting the model aviation community and the positive things that aeromodeling encompasses. So I gave considerable thought as to whether or not I wanted to write this particular column. In the end I felt that this story is important and worth telling. Read to the end and I think you'll agree.

An incident occurred April 16 when an AMA member who was flying a 450-size electric helicopter in a Tampa, Florida, public park lost control of the model and injured a young woman walking in the park. It appears that after calling 911, the pilot and his friends stayed with the injured person until EMTs arrived, then picked up their equipment and left. The local authorities will probably cite the men for ignoring a local ordinance against flying in that park.

This is an unfortunate incident that casts a cloud over what we do as model aviation enthusiasts. The local FOX News affiliate picked up on the story and ran a piece that included video that, by most standards, could be considered pretty graphic.

The potential for collateral harm to all of us as a result of this incident is significant. I've been asked a number of times whether or not the pilot and his friends involved were AMA members. In the end I'm not sure it matters. The news piece didn't say, "Park visitor injured by AMA member (or non-AMA member) flying a model helicopter." It said, "Park visitor injured by toy model helicopter."

The non-modeling public that watched that news story will now have a negative perception of model aviation and question the safety of our models. To complicate matters further, the incident occurred in a major metropolitan community park system that already had a ban on flying models.

This incident will reverberate throughout the country and, no doubt, will become a topic of discussion with authorities of other park systems. AMA has many chartered clubs that have operated safely for years in local parks, and we are watching closely to make sure that we do what we can to support our members and clubs that may be challenged now as a result of this incident.

However, what follows is the reason I decided to write this column. I've been a modeler for a long time. In all of those years, other than regarding the frequency reallocation issue a couple of decades ago, I don't think I've ever seen the aeromodeling community come together as it has with this situation.

AMA has an internal response plan for incidents like this. We were notified of the accident by an

officer of the International Radio Controlled Helicopter Association (IRCHA), one of AMA's Special Interest Groups. This triggered our response, which included working with IRCHA to identify a local responsible, articulate, RC helicopter pilot, Rolando Perez, who could speak on camera.

AMA's public relations manager spoke with Mr. Perez to go over significant points that should be made regarding AMA's Safety Code and record. In addition, our PR manager spoke directly with the FOX reporter, by phone about model aviation and all of the positive aspects of modeling. A statement was issued by AMA.

At the same time, modelers from 33 states and 14 countries – some AMA members and some not – came together on popular Internet forums to express their concern over the incident and what had happened to this young woman. An initiative was even launched to generate donations to help her offset expenses. Members of the local RC helicopter community made the effort to ensure that the local media were made aware of all of the positive aspects of model aviation and the value we bring to communities. As a result, in a short follow-up piece FOX News spoke about the positive “groundswell” of reaction from the “national modeling community” and the concerns expressed by modelers. Go to www.myfoxtampabay.com/dpp/news/local/hillsborough/422-police-interview-model-craft-operators to see this coverage.

The mother of the young woman expressed gratitude for the outpouring of support she has received from concerned aeromodelers.

Sometimes it takes something like this to make everyone realize that the common denominator between all of us is model aviation. It doesn't matter what type of model we fly, or maybe even whether or not we are all AMA members. While it was a terribly unfortunate incident, it provided us with the opportunity to show that the majority of us are responsible, safety-conscious individuals, and that we are protective of what we do as model aviators. And this is why I wrote this column.

Out of a bad incident came a lot of good. The public has now had the opportunity to see the positive in what we do and that we are a caring, concerned group. The efforts by everyone here will pay some dividend somewhere. It was a good job by all. And because of the actions of everyone involved in reacting to this accident, I think I've maintained my string of writing about the positive things that aeromodeling has to offer.

See you next time... →