

Ed Beauvais, co-founder and former CEO of America West Airlines, dies at 84

Ed Beauvais had five children, but anyone who knows him would say another offspring arrived in 1981. That's the year the airline accountant turned consultant founded America West Airlines.

Beauvais, who grew the spunky Tempe carrier into a major Arizona employer and an industry success story despite a rocky trip through bankruptcy court, talked about America West as if it were his child, and treated early employees like family.

Long after he left the airline in 1992, and long after the airline's name disappeared after the 2005 merger of America West and US Airways, Beauvais still fondly recalled America West.

At a reunion organized by America West employees in 2012, he regaled a packed crowd with details from the airline's startup days. The airline began flying in 1983 with just a few planes. It battled Southwest, American and Republic airlines, among others, at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport.

"What America West achieved — what you achieved — is a remarkable record of success in a highly combative atmosphere," he said. "Every time you got up, you got knocked down, and you had to get back up and keep on fighting."

Beauvais, 84, died on Sept. 28 in his home in Scottsdale. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Mary Ellen, five children, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Beauvais grew up in a middle-class family in Pueblo, Colorado, an industrial city 110 miles south of Denver. His father worked in the business office at Colorado Fuel & Iron Corp., a steel mill, and his mother stayed home with Beauvais, his fraternal twin, George, and his sister, Marilyn.

He excelled in sports in high school and earned a tryout with the Baltimore Orioles after he graduated.

"He was one of those people who you looked up to in high school and said, 'Gee, I wish I could do that,'" one of Beauvais' high-school classmates said in a 1991 interview. "It's an All-American boy type of story."

Beauvais decided against trying out for the Orioles in favor of a football scholarship at St. Joseph's College in Indiana. He played for the school for a while but ended up transferring to Regis College in Colorado, where he majored in accounting, minored in economics and played baseball.

"I decided that football was not a very good career and that education was extremely important," Beauvais said in a 1991 interview.

His first job out of college was in the accounting department at Colorado Fuel & Iron, but it was all airlines after that. Beauvais' career in the notoriously up-and-down industry began in the finance department at Frontier Airlines and continued at Bonanza Airlines, which brought him to Phoenix in 1966.

Beauvais switched to consulting in 1970. His clients included the city of Phoenix and Continental Airlines.

Sensing an opportunity with the deregulation of the airline industry in 1978, he co-founded America West in 1981 with his oldest son, Mark, colleague and mentor Don Neilson and attorney Michael Roach.

The entrepreneur's eternal optimism was tested from the start, with the company twice running out of money and losing its headquarters to a fire, all before the first flight departed.

America West got off the ground in August 1983, flying to a handful of cities from Phoenix. It grew rapidly, achieving early profits. Beauvais had the airline's logo stamped on his shirts, ties and cowboy boots.

He famously tussled with competitors, primarily Southwest Airlines. He tried to block the Dallas airline from moving into the new Terminal 4 at Sky Harbor and ran advertisements needling Southwest for its no-frills flying.

In the late 1980s, Beauvais suggested that Southwest passengers should be embarrassed to fly the airline when they could receive more amenities on America West (whose perks at the time included free drinks) for the same price.

Southwest fired back with a memorable spot featuring co-founder Herb Kelleher with a bag over his head. The airline also handed out paper bags at the airport to passengers during the promotion.

The competition and Beauvais' aggressive expansion plans for America West were good for Phoenix passengers, who enjoyed nonstop flights around the country, including service to Hawaii on a Boeing 747. The good times didn't last, though, thanks to the airline's rapid growth, the poor economy and the Gulf War. America West, drained of cash, ended up in bankruptcy in June 1991.

Less than 24 hours after the filing, in an interview in his office in Tempe, the always glass-half-full Beauvais predicted America West would survive despite a large chorus of naysayers. "I think our prospects of working our way through are reasonably good," he told a reporter.

America West shrank and survived — emerging from bankruptcy in August 1994 — but Beauvais wasn't around for most of the reorganization. He lost his job as CEO a couple of months into the bankruptcy case and was replaced as chairman in 1992.

He went on to form an airline in Colorado, Western Pacific Airlines, which later failed, but remained close to many America West front-line workers and was invited by company executives to events honoring America West after the America West-US Airways merger in 2005.

He was the featured speaker at an employee-organized reunion at the Arizona Biltmore resort in 2012, where he was given a standing ovation and an I Love America West coffee mug.

"I'm just extremely proud of what the company did here and extremely proud of the employees of America West," Beauvais said in a 2013 interview after US Airways announced its merger

plans with American Airlines.

Beauvais' family announced his death in a social media post.

"In addition to his storied entrepreneurial career in the airline industry, Mr. Beauvais was a noted family man that also created a family atmosphere at the companies he built. The many current and former employees who experienced this still remember Ed with fondness decades later," the announcement said.

"Famous for his open door policy, approachable nature and interest in others, he's still remembered for creating an excellent working environment and was beloved by those who were part of it."

Beauvais received Inc. magazine's "1989 Entrepreneur of The Year" award, was recognized as an "Arizona History Maker," was named one of Arizona's 25 "Leaders and Legends" in 2014 and was inducted into The Arizona Aviation Hall of Fame in 2014.

-<https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona/2021/10/01/ed-beauvais-co-founder-and-former-ceo-america-west-airlines-dies-84/5959075001/>