

Nick Sabatini: Up Close and Personal

By Maria Papageorgiou



Before retiring from FAA, Nick Sabatini sat down to talk a bit about his life. "I'm living the American dream," he said, as he looked around the office he has occupied since 2001 and will leave behind when he retires January 3, 2009. In many respects, his life is an updated version of the classic immigrant story that was familiar at the start of 20th century America.

Many FAAers are unaware that the Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety (AVS) was born in Vasto, Italy, a picturesque seaside town on the Adriatic coast. At the age of two, he and his mother, father, and three older sisters immigrated to America, where they settled in the Bronx, New York.

The Bronx has always had a reputation as a tough neighborhood, but Nick was fortunate to have devoted parents who gave him an unshakable moral foundation. "They gave me my core values, my magnetic north," he said with a look of reminiscence and gratitude on his face. He also had the good fortune to come of age in an era that respected authority. As a young man, Nick noticed that whenever chaos or crime disrupted life in the Bronx, the policemen restored order again – and they were respected for doing so. He made up his mind that someday he, too, would become one of them. Ignoring those who dismissed his desire as a foolish dream, he persevered and ultimately was admitted to the NYPD Police Academy. He learned that he should "never listen to naysayers," those folks who try to tell you that something is out of your reach. This scenario of wanting to stretch professionally while having to ignore others' defeatist predictions played out many more times in Nick's life. After two years patrolling high-crime areas as part of the NYPD, he decided to exchange the street beat for the mounted police. "It was said that you had to have connections to switch from the street to a specialized unit, but I put in for a transfer and was selected."

By the age of 27, Nick got the itch to fly ("I fell in love with it"). Eyeing the NYPD Aviation Unit, he asked them what would make him competitive enough to be selected to fly for them, and the answer was ratings. Characteristically, for three years and on his own dime, he threw himself into earning one rating after another. Then, turning a deaf ear to naysayers once again, he applied to the unit and snagged the first vacancy. Just like that.

If you ask him if there is something special about him that convinced employers to choose him, he immediately nixes the idea. To him, it all comes down to having a prize in mind. As he sees it, "Once you have the vision, make it happen." Still, when you study this thoughtful, well-spoken, and dignified man, you can't help thinking he channels some of the regal energy of his glorious Roman Empire ancestors. His taste in movies (*Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator* are favorites) does reveal a penchant for extravaganzas featuring Roman legions.

From his father, he learned a sound guiding principle for finding joy in your professional life: "Do what you love to do because success is not a destination." This advice has obviously served Nick well, and he has passed it on to his own sons, Stephen and Chris. For Nick, the workplace isn't the only arena in which success is measured. He firmly believes in maintaining strong family ties and will go to great lengths to preserve them. When he was with the U.S. Customs Drug Interdiction Air Unit, he realized that he was spending too much time away from his family. Someone suggested that he work for the FAA for a more balanced life, and in no time he was working as an ops inspector at the Charleston, W.Va., Flight Standards District Office (FSDO). "When I applied to FAA, we were living in Nyack, N.Y., and there was always so much snow and ice. I was offered a couple places further north than Nyack, but my wife refused to go any further north. And so it was Charleston." (His late wife, Ginny, worked in the Office of Chief Counsel at FAA. Not only intelligent but also beautiful, as a young woman she danced in several well-known Broadway shows. In fact, Ginny was appearing in the original cast of *Camelot* when she and Nick first met.)



Nick with Maria Papageorgiou

When talking about FAA, the Associate Administrator fondly recalls the mentors who helped him as he moved up the "corporate" ladder – Chet Baird at the Charleston FSDO; Jim Fallace at Eastern Region; and Tony Broderick, the former Associate Administrator of Regulation and Certification, at Headquarters. As he spoke of them, it was obvious how much their help and friendship meant to him. Reflecting on his indebtedness to these three individuals prompted him to say that "we need to encourage people to seek career opportunities." In other words, pass it on.

As the Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety, Nick has had an incredible run. Under his management, AVS changed the way it does business (think ISO certification and customer service, the unified AVS, and the voluntary safety programs). His aim was to "shape a seamless, single, integrated AVS. That [was] the driver."

So, who or what influenced the way Nick led the place? Without hesitation, he acknowledged two primary influences, his police work and books. "I came from 20 years of a police mentality. I was trained to take charge, bring order, and protect." His bookshelf holds numerous biographies (among them volumes on Lincoln and JFK) as well as self-help books. "In reading, you discover, learn, and then apply what you've learned."

For decades now, his life has been wrapped around aviation, but what would he have done if he hadn't been beguiled by the Wright Brothers' flying machine? "I probably would have stayed with the police department," he answers in less than a New York minute. Now that he's about to

exit from 800 Independence Avenue for the last time as an employee, what's his next step? First and foremost he plans to spend more time with his family, which includes two grandsons. The annual family vacation is a Sabatini tradition, but this family doesn't just go down to the shore.

Last year, they went rock climbing in Jeeps at Moab, Utah. Nick, who loves to work with his hands, plans to modify his own Jeep for another crack at Moab's craggy slopes. For quieter pleasures, he enjoys traveling – especially to Italy – and listening to music. His musical taste is

eclectic, ranging from Italian opera to Kenny Chesney and David Gray. "A steady diet of one thing is boring," he says. With this as another of his guiding principles, you know that as Nick Sabatini continues his life's journey, the itinerary will be varied, exhilarating, and, without a doubt, wonderfully challenging.

