



# CONTROL CENTER

## A LAWYER IN THE TOWER

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**PHOTOGRAPHY BY**  
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*“Cactus One, Phoenix Tower, Runway 25 left cleared to land, Wind two three zero at eight, Traffic holding in position. There will be one departure prior to your arrival ...”*

Wall-to-wall monitors track the progress of swarms of blinking green dots. Busy air-traffic controllers ping-pong commands, orchestrating a worldwide network of comers and goers with destinations as varied as their points of origin.

Michael Pearson, headset-clad and ready to begin work, briefly admires the Valley skyline.

Maintaining control—whether in the tower, the courtroom or the classroom—is the number-one task for Pearson. He splits his time between trial work and tower work, devoting his free moments to an associate professorship at Arizona State University.

**Cara Christian** is a Spanish and English double-major at Davidson College in North Carolina. She expects to pursue Latin American studies and journalism in her graduate work.

Pearson got his start in aviation in 1984 and currently operates within both the tower and TRACON sectors of air-traffic control. (The

Terminal Radar Approach Control manages aircraft departing and arriving within 50 miles of the airport.)

An MBA later, he enrolled in Arizona State University’s College of Law, where he graduated cum laude in 1994. Pearson has since made the natural transition into aviation law (and crash litigation), practicing at Curry, Pearson & Wooten PLLC, in Phoenix.

The easygoing rhythm in the tower changes in a heartbeat to accommodate an emergency landing.

“Does this happen often?” a visitor asks.

One man swivels around to explain. An “emergency” rarely refers to actual crises, and small-scale malfunctions require this heightened attention 10 times or more daily. The general consensus is of the “better safe than sorry” philosophy.

Another interjects that what the public defines as a real “emergency” comes once or twice a career. Landings are re-arranged, aircraft are shuffled from the runway and an entourage of emer-



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**Above: Mike Pearson on a tower parapet. Right: Pearson works while the new tower—335 feet high, almost twice the height of the current tower—is constructed in the background.**

In the daily ins and outs of his work, Pearson receives incredulous looks, forwarded lawyer jokes, harmless inquiry and gems of insight into the outsider’s perspective on the practice of law. Through these and other interactions, he has found that the “public’s perception regarding lawyers, and the practice of law in general, is not as poor as most believe, yet it isn’t nearly as good as it used to be.”

Due to the nature of his work, Pearson can seamlessly shift from aviation to litigation and act as a de facto ambassador between fields.

Regarding law, Pearson is optimistic.

“Most of the time, people are interested in the profession. They want to talk about it. They want to dispel some myths. A lot of the time the public thinks it’s overly stressful work, where for the most part the majority of people I work with really like what they do, like any other job.”

Over time, he has joined forces with other lawyer-pilots in both the National Transportation Safety Board Bar Association (of which he is a current member) and the Lawyers and Pilots Bar

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gency vehicles prepares for the arrival. Then, without pomp or pageantry, the plane makes its landing.

In a brief moment of relaxation, Pearson explains the emergency call to be a “possible flaps malfunction that could impact the landing characteristics of the aircraft.” In layman’s terms, the plane landed with a little more speed than the pilot had anticipated. Unfazed, the air-traffic controllers resume chatter and activity as the tower regains its rhythm.

Association. These organizations aim to enhance safety and government cooperation in the fields of aviation and aviation law, creating a network of specially skilled lawyer-pilots.



Michael Pearson thrives in this professional intersect.

“It’s like cross-training, each profession for the other. I think air-traffic control has helped me become a lawyer; it taught me syllogistic patterns.”

Likewise, his casework has developed an appreciation for the legal implications of daily developments in aviation.

Though he does not intentionally pursue high-pressure careers, Pearson is convinced his affinity for trial work is a natural extension of the stress-management skills he developed in his early days at the Phoenix tower.

“I think air-traffic control at a very young age taught me to operate level-headed under stress. In the courtroom, unless you’re able to compartmentalize stress, it can consume you—and I’m not necessarily sure if I didn’t have my background that that would have appealed to me.” Pearson also cites time management, lots of professional mentors and his wife as the foundations of his career.

Though these fields theoretically coalesce, fitting them together in a daily planner can be difficult. He carefully monitors his caseload, and he works select days at the tower, leaving room for his class schedule at ASU, his wife and three young children. Admittedly, sleep does not often factor into the equation.

Pearson describes this balancing act.

“As far as my work at the tower goes, I take nothing home. There’s no paperwork, there’s no out basket, and really no tangible work product. I come to work, I do my job, and I am able to do my legal work on my own time. It gets hectic when I teach depending on what my workload is there.”

Pearson concludes, “I really enjoy what I do. I was very fortunate at a young age to be given opportunities. I’m grateful to a lot of people on the legal side, I’m grateful to a lot of people from the FAA, and I’m grateful to a lot of people from ASU. I never started off with this plan, but I would’ve been happy to take a career as an associate professor.”

“As a controller I’ve worked in the various offices, and I would’ve been happy with that. And as a lawyer, I love what I do. It was never a career goal of mine to do these three things, but I’ve had some wonderful opportunities open for me that I chose to pursue.”

*“Cactus One, Phoenix Tower. Over and out.”*