

# The Sky's the Limit

Sonny Friedman  
has seen a lot of  
changes and found  
new opportunities  
in his 50-plus  
years in plumbing

by Jason Schneider



Sonny Friedman (right) with his son, Ben.



He had planned to go into dentistry. He applied to dental school, but wasn't accepted. "Something about grades," says Sonny Friedman, owner of Atlas Plumbing Company in Dallas.

After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, he did two things: married his high school sweetheart, Carolyn, and took a job with a plumbing company. "I began my plumbing career as an apprentice plumber and 'ditch-digger supreme' at a plumbing company that was owned by my wife's grandfather," he says.

Friedman learned that he was going to be drafted. "The Vietnam War was in high gear, and I knew that Vietnam was no place for me, so I joined the Navy," he said. "Luckily I found a Naval Air Reserve unit near Dallas."

#### When one door closes ...

At a naval air station outside Memphis, Tenn., Friedman was trained as an anti-submarine warfare electronics equipment operator, to serve as a crew

member on an airplane whose mission was to locate and destroy enemy submarines.

The Navy offered him the opportunity to go to Officer Candidate School, followed by flight school. "I have always loved airplanes, and the long-range plan of staying in the Navy for eight years as a pilot, then becoming a highly paid airline pilot seemed a lot cooler than digging ditches," he says.

He returned to Dallas after training to find that the plumbing company where he had been working was experiencing financial problems.

"Carolyn was not enamored with the idea of being a Navy wife for eight years, and with good reason—it's not for everyone," he says. "So I declined the offers of becoming a Top Gun pilot. One door closes, another door opens ... along comes the Atlas Plumbing offer."

#### Business owner

A friend of Friedman's in-laws owned Atlas Plumbing Company and was

ready to retire. "He offered to sell it to us, so my brother-in-law, who was graduating from Southern Methodist University with a degree in business, and I became the owners of Atlas Plumbing Company in September 1967," he says.

Joe, Friedman's brother-in-law, stayed with the company until 1971. "The bank and I bought his interest in Atlas and I became the sole owner of a very old and very reputable, but small, plumbing service business," he says.

Friedman went to the local Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors Association (PHCC) apprentice school, then tested and received his Master Plumber license (now called a Responsible Master license).

#### A changing industry

Looking back over his more than 50 years in plumbing, Friedman has seen a lot of changes in the industry. "Two-way radios in the trucks was a new device at the time I became the owner of Atlas

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# Attitude, Not Altitude

## Challenge Air opens a world of possibilities to special needs children

For 25 years, Sonny Friedman of Atlas Plumbing Company in Dallas has been a part of Challenge Air for Kids and Friends, an organization that takes special needs children on flights—and lets them, at altitude, take the controls.

It all began with Friedman's best friend, Rick Amber, a Navy fighter pilot who flew Mach 2 jets off aircraft carriers. Returning from his 109th mission in Vietnam, Amber crashed into the carrier.

"Rick lived through the explosion, but his ejection from the plane slammed him into the superstructure of the carrier and he broke his back at shoulder height, requiring him to live the rest of his life in a wheelchair," he says. "A fighter pilot is a fighter pilot, only at an altitude of three feet instead of 30,000 feet.

"Success is about attitude, not altitude," Friedman adds.

Amber got back into aviation in 1990. "He was working with kids in wheelchairs, teaching them how to play tennis, and asked the kids' parents if he could take them up in a rented Cessna," says Friedman. "At altitude, he let the kids fly the plane."

And Challenge Air was born.

"You just flew an airplane, something you never dreamed that you could do. Now, what else can you do?' That's the mission on which Rick founded Challenge Air for Kids and



Friends," says Friedman. "Rick lived a great life until cancer took him from us in 1997, but I promised him that we would carry it on. We formed a Board of Trustees and hired an executive director."

Today, each special needs child is allowed to take two friends with them on the flight to share the experience. There is no cost to the families—the organization is dependent on donations from individuals, businesses, and foundations.

There are 16 Fly Day events at airports across the country, and to date, Challenge Air has flown more than 34,000

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Plumbing Company,” he says. “I have seen huge advances in materials, tools, and technology. I have seen the invention of business tools that help us to run our businesses better and easier.”

What he hasn't seen, Friedman adds, are productive efforts to attract people into the industry. “This is the biggest problem that I see in our industry at this time,” he says. “We have too few trade schools today. Shop classes are not being given in standard high schools.

“For the young man or woman desiring a career in the plumbing industry: There are few fields in which there has always been, and always will be, a high demand for people,” he adds. “Our nation, and the entire world, is dependent on clean water and on sanitation. The plumbing profession offers job security. You will always be needed.”

### Good advice

Friedman says the best advice he's ever been given is to join the PHCC.

“I was told to get involved ‘up to your neck’ with this group, and I did,” he says. “This was not a group of my competitors as I originally envisioned, but a group of my peers, people who have been my mentors and my friends; people who have shared their knowledge, their experience, and, when asked for, their advice. I truly believe that I owe my success in business to these fine people, and to the PHCC organization, which facilitated my learning of what and how to be a successful contractor.”

And he offers the same advice to oth-



Atlas Plumbing's office manager Linda Martinez

er: “For business owners, join and be an active member of your PHCC trade association, on all levels: local, state, and national.”

Friedman was one of the founders of the Quality Service Contractors, an enhanced service group of PHCC–National Association. “This is where I learned how to be the ‘best of the best’ ... how to be one of the top guns in the plumbing service business,” he says. “No, I was never a Navy fighter pilot, but I do understand what it means to be one. My best friend was one. PHCC can help you to be a successful business owner.”

### Controlling your destiny

Friedman has learned a lot through the years, both through his business and through his work with Challenge Air (see sidebar).

“I have learned that we set our own limits,” he says. “Sometimes, we find a

comfort zone and stay there, and that's fine. For others, the sky is the limit. I've seen three-truck family businesses become 60-truck businesses and sell for \$20 million, years later. We have the opportunity to control our own destiny.”

Friedman relates the story of Jessica Cox, a woman he met through Challenge Air. Cox was born without arms; she surfs, has a black belt in karate, has a pilot's license, and is a motivational speaker.

“She says that early on, she learned of the power that comes from eliminating ‘I can't’ from your vocabulary,” he says. “I find the strength and the courage needed to be the owner of a plumbing business in good times and bad through what I have been fortunate enough to learn from my friends in the industry, and from the families and special needs children who are served by Challenge Air.”

## Attitude, Not Altitude

special needs children.

“Each Fly Day is a party at a local airport,” he says. “Balloons, face painters, clowns, service animals, food, music ... a fun day for the 100 to 150 families,” he says. “The pilots—all volunteers—will put their hands in the air during the flight to show that the challenged child is really flying the plane ... at a 20-degree bank!”

Friedman serves as the ground school instructor, telling families “a little about how an airplane works and a lot about

safety on the flight line.”

What does he find most rewarding? “I guess the most rewarding experience is knowing that I'm fulfilling a promise that I made to a dying friend over 20 years ago,” he says. “I go to the cemetery every year on the anniversary of his death and share a beer with him, and thank him for the legacy that he left to me and to so many others.”

To learn more about Challenge Air for Kids and Friends, visit [challengeair.com](http://challengeair.com).