

Kestrel's power couple elevates luxury to a cruising altitude

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They are now a leading power couple in the world of VIP aviation, but it hasn't always been that way.

Veteran aviation executive [Stephen Vella](#) and [Nohl Martin](#), an entrepreneur and international business consultant, crossed paths in some of the most glamorous destinations in the Middle East, as their companies worked different pieces of a deal or worked for some of the same clients in the Arab Gulf.



What began as a business relationship grew into love at 35,000 feet.

Now both of them are partners at Kirkland-based Kestrel Aviation Management, a privately held aerospace asset management and consulting company, specializing in the purchase, sale, and management of commercial and corporate aircraft.

Their clients often demand discretion and confidentiality, due to privacy and security considerations associated with being very wealthy and owning a VIP jet and or international leased aircraft.

Vella, Kestrel's CEO, has logged 37 years in the global aerospace and aviation industry. He has been involved in helping parties buy or sell more than 350 large commercial and corporate aircraft valued at more than \$50 billion, and helped to arrange \$9 billion of financing on behalf of airlines, governments, corporations, investors and high net worth individuals.

Vella has started or restructured eight small airlines and managed airline acquisitions in Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America. Through it all, Vella, a Gibraltar-born British citizen who speaks three languages, has acted

much like a senior diplomat: kind, smiling, courteous, and unflappable, no matter how stressful things get.

“As a buyer’s advocate, we educate high net worth families and their attorneys to help them make sure they’re buying the right business jet or commercial jet at the right price,” Vella says. “A lot of times, these people can leave millions of dollars on the table as they choose engines and negotiate warranties. We want our clients to walk away from deals smiling.”

Martin has her own business niche and special expertise in aerospace, making her an ideal partner.

She founded her own company, IgniteBiz, which specializes in developing business deals and stronger partnerships between North American and Middle Eastern companies with an emphasis on Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Like Vella, California-born Martin has a deep commitment to the Arab Gulf region along with an acute sensitivity to its different customs and business practices.

She is a board member of a group that celebrates and connects with women in the Arab Gulf countries.

Martin said it can be frustrating that they often cannot talk about their work.

“For us, one of the challenges is that because our work is done quietly, we rely on introductions and referrals,” she said.

That’s not always the case, though.

Last year, Vella and Martin’s work at Kestrel on a VIP luxury Dreamliner 787 private jetliner from [Boeing](#) made headlines around the world after its introduction at an airshow in Geneva.

It was purchased by a Chinese billionaire’s company for an estimated \$350 million and will be used as a luxury charter aircraft. It was the company’s 11th widebody customization project, but the first it was able to share with the world. The plane’s luxury interior was featured in Fortune Magazine, The Telegraph Magazine and dozens of other publications.

For the low-profile couple, it was a rare moment of enjoying the international limelight and celebrating the success they have had in this competitive business.

Kestrel Aviation Management

- Founded: in 2009 (transferred operations to U.S. 2014)
- Owners: CEO [Stephen Vella](#), Executive Vice President [Nohl Martin](#)
- Locations: Kirkland
- Online: www.kestrelaviation.com
- Number of employees: 2 full-time plus a half-dozen independent contractors
- Revenue: Between \$1 million and \$3 million per year

LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Impeccable ethics: "We've walked away from deals where we could have made a lot of money. But cross that boundary line and you're dead. Our industry is too small."

2. Listening to customers. "There is an element of sensitivity wound into this that OEMs (jet manufacturers) don't always offer. Service the client as if you were the client. Listening to their needs and their wants, then initiate discussions which lead to reflection and refinements on this front."

3. Treat clients' money like your money. "We do this whether we're dealing with a commercial jet buyer or a business jet buyer."

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