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**FINGERS IN LOTS OF PIES:** Jim Confalone, owner of Chalk's Ocean Airways, attends to many other enterprises as well.

## Entrepreneur flies high with attention to detail, dedication to customer

BY INA PAIVA CORDLE

icordle@herald.com

Jim Confalone sleeps 4½ hours a night, hates to waste time, refuses to buy a TV set, and owns the desk of his best friend, the late Charles "Bebe" Rebozo.

Confalone is the entrepreneurial owner of Chalk's Ocean Airways, along with nearly a dozen ventures scattered from Miami to Maine, and a man who can't resist an opportunity.

That's why he traded his

### THE QUICK TAKE

JIM CONFALONE

two waterfront homes — in Coconut Grove and Bar Harbor, Maine — for seaplanes, to pull the historic airline out of bankruptcy and keep it

in the air.

And that's also why he bought land on U.S. 1 in Miami and built The Car Wash and The Oil Change — a business he hopes to expand to 100 sites nationwide.

Confalone, 57, is a self-made millionaire whose Italian immigrant family was once the poorest in Melrose, Mass. He loves a challenge — "For fun and profit. But," he added, "it doesn't have to be profitable right away."

A fanatic for details, Confalone checks with his staff at all hours of the day and night. He choreographs every moment of the customer's experience at his businesses, down to the maximum number of times the phone can ring (twice) and how the toilet paper in the bathrooms must be folded (in a "V") after every use. Employees are prohibited from talking to each other in a customer's presence — even from acknowledging their boss, if he should walk in.

### 'SHOW BUSINESS'

"It's show business," he said. "At every business, you have to go at it like it's entertainment."

Confalone's secret to success: his former mentor and role model, Rebozo, the famous friend of President Richard Nixon and president of Key Biscayne Bank. He met Rebozo through Bebe's late sister, Herminia "Mini" O'Brien. She handled his lease for The Bug House, a Miami car dealership Confalone owned in the 1970s.

Like a father figure,

Rebozo guided and often financed Confalone's real estate investments before his death two years ago.

Confalone even named a mountain peak at his 6,400-acre Big Squaw Mountain Resort in Greenville, Maine, "Bebe's Peak."

### 'JUST LIKE BEBE'

"It's just like Bebe, because he overlooked everything I did," Confalone said, sitting in his modest, white-tiled office that faces The Car Wash.

Seated at his desk — which used to be Rebozo's — Confalone is dressed in his usual business attire of pressed jeans and a polo shirt. The book *How to Get Your Point Across in 30 Seconds or Less* is propped up on the desk — geared to send a message to visitors.

Confalone says he's making up for his youth, when he flunked his sophomore year of high school — twice — before buckling down and graduating. He doesn't waste time on television. He devours history books.

Enamored with stock-car racing and airplanes, Confalone got his aviation mechanic and pilot's license at a vocational school, then worked as a mechanic at a car dealer before joining the Naval Reserves.

A year later, in 1965, he moved to Miami to work as a pilot for Eastern Airlines, a career that ended with the carrier's 1991 demise.

### OTHER VENTURES

Today, Confalone owns so many ventures that he has trouble keeping track. There's Chalk's, The Car Wash, The Oil Change and the resort in Maine, with a hotel, restaurants, ski school and ski shops — which he bought five years ago on the verge of its third bankruptcy. Skier visits are up tenfold, and the resort reported a profit last year.

"He's very good at seeing what problems need to be addressed, and he is very customer oriented," said José Herrera, president of Arex Realty.

Confalone also owns the Okeechobee Jet Center, a fuel farm at Okeechobee Airport; two aviation parts companies; a real estate brokerage firm; a car body shop, and a furniture and equipment distributor. Looking to the day when electric and battery-operated cars are popular, he holds the trademark on the names The Charge Station and The Battery Station.