

## Flying the Invisible Jet; A Dream Come True

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*United Airlines*

A little girl dreams of flying a jet, but as each year passes the dream seems unrealistic and out of reach. When she is old enough, she becomes a flight attendant. It is then she learns that being a pilot is not just for men in the military, and that it is an attainable goal for anyone that sets their mind to it. With the encouragement of several airline pilots and her parents, she realizes her dream of becoming a pilot. In aviation, timing is everything. Through a series of events, she becomes a flight instructor, an FBO and Flight School Manager, and a professor at several different universities. Along the way, she earned a doctorate in Aviation. She had a very successful career in academia but still had that nagging desire to fly a jet. Finally, 20 years after her first flight lesson, she got a job flying a jet for an airline. This is the story of her aviation journey.

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When I was a little girl, I used to twirl around the living room in my Wonder Woman pjs, dreaming of growing up to be a beautiful crime fighter who flew an invisible jet. Ah, to have the imagination and confidence of that little girl again. As I grew older, I maintained my admiration of Wonder Woman, but the dream of flying the invisible jet slowly slipped away.

My aviation experience is a bit backwards from others. I did start with the goal of flying for the airlines, but through a series of events, I ended up teaching first in academia for over a decade before eventually going to the airlines.

I was 21 before I knew what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Prior to that point, I had completed three years at University of Florida (UF), changing my degree multiple times, trying to find something that excited me. It wasn't until I took a break from university and got a job as a flight attendant with Atlantic Coast Airlines (ACA) in 1998 that I learned about the career of a professional pilot. I became a flight attendant because I liked traveling and seeing new places, but after doing that for several months, I became intrigued by the idea of working on the other side of the cockpit door. I expressed interest to the pilots, and they all happily showed me many of the different systems. Pilots have a natural enthusiasm for all things aviation, and they were excited to share their knowledge with me. I took my first flight lesson six months after becoming a flight attendant. I was hooked.

I continued working as a flight attendant while I took flying lessons on my days off. As I got closer to getting my private pilot certificate, I realized it would be best if I completed my degree and focused on flight training. With that in mind, I gave my notice to the airline and enrolled in the Professional Aviation Flight Technology degree at Indiana State University (ISU) in January 2000. My goal was to get my degree, get all my flight certificates, and fly as much as possible so I could be re-hired by my airline, this time as a pilot.

The credits I transferred from UF covered most of the general education requirements, but I would need to take all of the core aviation courses. This time, I had a real enthusiasm for the subject I was learning. I graduated with a 3.89/4.0 GPA two years later, having completed private, instrument, commercial, and certified flight instructor (CFI) certificates and ratings. It was during this time the tragic events of 9/11 were taking their toll on the aviation industry. I worked as a full-time flight instructor at the Terre Haute Air Center (THAC) for the next several years, building time and experiences. Before becoming a CFI, I was trepidatious about the huge responsibility of teaching people how to fly. After doing it for a while, I really came to love it. It was very rewarding, seeing the excitement my students got from learning new things, watching them improve, and progress through their flight certificates.

During this time, I got my certified flight instructor instrument (CFII), multi-engine rating, then multi engine instructor (MEI) certificates, as I also worked my way up at the flight school, becoming Assistant Chief Flight Instructor, then Chief Flight Instructor, and eventually fixed base operator (FBO) Manager. It was during this time frame that I was approached by the Chair of the Aviation Department at ISU about working on my master's degree. He offered to hire me as a graduate assistant, with the duties of teaching a pilot ground school course each semester, while the department paid for my graduate course work. I had honestly never

considered getting a master's degree, but luckily for me, he convinced me of the benefits of a graduate degree. I already had experience teaching students one-on-one at the flight school, but it's a bit different teaching an entire classroom. I found it a bit intimidating at first but grew more comfortable with experience and realized I really enjoyed it. I graduated with a master's degree in Human Resource Development, which is essentially how to develop training programs in the workplace. It paired nicely with my role at the flight school. It was also during these years that I got married and had my first child. Life was good.

At this point, I had been working at the flight school for six years, much longer than I ever planned when I arrived in Terre Haute. I was ready for a new adventure. In the time I had been building my resume to get rehired by ACA, they had gone out of business. The regionals were hiring but starting wages were terrible, and I would have to take a substantial pay cut from my salary as FBO Manager. In discussions with the Aviation Department Chair at ISU, he said he would love to have me join the faculty full time, with a raise. How could I say no to that? I gave notice to the flight school and started teaching full time at ISU a month later.

In academia, it is important to have a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or Doctor of Education (EdD). After teaching on campus full time for a year, I enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction PhD program at ISU. By this point, I had shelved the idea of flying for the airlines, and instead put all my effort into improving my skills as a university educator. With a renewed focus on this goal, I registered for two PhD courses each semester, in addition to teaching four undergraduate courses each semester. It was also during this time we had our second child. I was busy to say the least!

Although I loved my time teaching at ISU, I was on an annual contract. I didn't know until July each summer if I would be rehired for the Fall semester. It was not a comfortable feeling, even though the Department Chair assured me my contract was imminently going to be approved. I started looking for other faculty positions and came across an opening at Florida Institute of Technology (FIT). My husband and I have always loved the idea of living in Florida, so we jumped at the opportunity. I applied for the position, did a phone interview, and then flew down for a face-to-face interview. Luckily for me, they liked me and my flight and education experiences, and offered me a job as faculty member.

I started teaching at FIT in 2010. I loved it. I advanced from Instructor to Assistant Professor, to Associate Professor. I transferred to their PhD program in Aviation Sciences, from which I graduated in 2015. I was promoted to Division Director, then Panama Program Manager, then Deputy Director of FIT Aviation, and finally Associate Dean.

It was 2017 when I started to rethink the idea of flying for the airlines. There were a couple key events that led to this.

I truly enjoyed the FIT students and faculty, but with each promotion and advancement, I spent less time in the classroom and less time flying. I really missed flying. I missed the wind, being outside, the simple pleasure of taking off and landing. I just did not have time with all the responsibilities on campus.

Another key event was airline hiring. The airlines had been hiring like crazy the last few years; the looming pilot shortage was really happening. In an effort to outbid each other, regional airlines were all offering very large bonuses, upwards of \$60,000, to new hires. Pay increased dramatically, it became a livable wage. Two of my previous FIT students had been hired by Delta at age 23. Of course, they were outstanding students and pilots and always put forth their best effort, but wow! 23 and working for a major airline. That was unheard of when I first started flying.

And finally, I joined a group called Female Aviators Sticking Together (FAST). As a female in aviation, of course I am aware I am in a field mostly dominated by men. According to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data from 2020, females are currently 5.7% of the total pilot population in the United States. The 7,549 female pilots with an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate account for only 4.6% of the total number of ATPs in the US. Having been in aviation for almost 20 years, I knew quite a few female pilots that flew for the airlines that loved their career. However, this FAST group was a bit of an eye opener. Thousands of female pilots, from all over the world, discussing their aviation joys and concerns, advancements and setbacks, careers and family life. It was so motivating to me to read their stories and see so much of myself in them. These events all happened within six months of each other, and it really got me considering what I wanted, professionally. I knew this would be very disruptive to my family life, but thankfully, I am married to a very understanding man who has always been very supportive of my career choices.

I applied to Air Wisconsin Airlines in early May 2019, interviewed, and started training by the end of the month. The training was very thorough, and the standards were set high. The simulator training was honestly much harder than I thought it would be. I think I had a skewed vision of the level of difficulty, based on my experiences with the ACA pilots while a flight attendant. They were always so calm and at ease, while my simulator partner and I were dealing with one emergency after the next! Obviously, I was not aware of the level of training that went on behind the scenes. Air Wisconsin currently exclusively flies the Bombardier CRJ-200, which is the same aircraft I used to fly in as a flight attendant. It felt like I had come full circle. I didn't realize how much satisfaction I would get from completing the goal I had set for myself as a 21-year-old.

Then I got to be a real airline pilot! What a thrill. I was familiar with the lifestyle. Not much had changed, in that regard, since I was a flight attendant. We even flew to many of the same destinations I flew to as a flight attendant. What had changed substantially were the airport facilities and security. It was incredible seeing how much had changed in the 20 years I had been away from airline life.

Another exciting event that happened for me in January 2020, was, I interviewed with United Airlines through their Aviate program, and was selected. I could be a United pilot in as little as 2 more years! It felt like everything was falling nicely into place. I wasn't flying the line long before Covid struck and changed the outlook for aviation again. It was a stressful time for aviation, and the entire world. I took comfort in knowing that I still had a spot at United, once I reached the hiring minimums and they had a need to hire pilots. I had several people ask me if I

regretted my decision, leaving academia for the airlines right before a global pandemic. Well, obviously my timing wasn't great, but that was not a situation I foresaw. As I fully expected flying to return to normal once the pandemic subsided, I viewed it more as a professional setback than a career killer. Fortunately, I was teaching online classes for FIT. Those extra paychecks got us through my furlough. At this time, aviation is roaring back in the US, flights are full, and the airlines are hiring for all types of positions, especially pilots.

While Covid slowed down my progress towards achieving my hourly flight time goals to get hired by United, I finally met all the requirements around Thanksgiving of 2022. By December I had been contacted for a class date in mid-January. I was finally going to be a United pilot! It was almost exactly three years from my original interview with United that I started ground school. The training was top notch. As a classroom instructor for over a decade, I was very impressed with the level of instruction, as well as the level of detail in the curriculum materials we were given. The instruction followed the Core Values of United; Safe, Caring, Dependable, and Efficient. I chose to fly the Boeing 737. It was an incredibly professional group of instructor pilots that I worked with at the training center. I felt very welcomed and supported through the entire training process. I completed simulator training mid-March and flew my first flight as a 737 pilot on March 21, 2023. I've only been flying the line for six weeks, but all my experiences with my coworkers so far have been very pleasant. The Captains have gone out of their way to make me feel comfortable as a new First Officer. As a female in aviation, it's always exciting to fly with another female. It doesn't happen that often so it's a unique experience. United has one of the higher percentages of female pilots, at 7.7%, compared to other US carriers, but it is still quite low compared to the overall number of airline pilots. I feel quite proud to be a part of that percentage, and I hope to see that number increase over the years as more women see the exciting opportunities in aviation and decide to join the flight deck.

I am happy with the career choices I have made, and I have enjoyed each job along the way. I enjoyed flight instructing and classroom instructing, and I enjoyed the responsibility and complex issues I dealt with as a manager at the flight school and as a faculty member at FIT. I feel lucky to finally be at the airline that I aspired to join 25 years ago. I still love to teach, and I continue to teach online for FIT. I expect that someday I would like to teach for United in some sort of capacity, and I see myself eventually retiring from airlines and going back to academia.

None of this would have been possible had I not been encouraged by so many different groups along the way: the pilots I flew with while a flight attendant, my parents for encouraging my pilot aspirations, my flight instructors, the professors at ISU, my husband, my coworkers at FIT, and a group of female pilots that cheered us all on from social media. Other than my mother and the female pilots I knew, every single person encouraging me to go further in my aviation career have been men. The year I flew with ACA, it was all male pilots who advised me on what to look for at a flight school, in a flight instructor, and where to go to college. It was male classmates and flight instructors that cheered me on during my flight training. It was an all-male board of directors that hired me as an FBO manager. It was a male Department Head that convinced me to get a master's degree, and a different male Department Head that hired me to be the only female on faculty member in the Aviation Department at ISU. I was hired and mentored

by the Dean of the College of Aeronautics at FIT, and I earned my doctorate under the instruction of male professors. I was hired by a male Chief Pilot at Air Wisconsin and trained by all males in their training department. I finally had a female Captain interview me for United, but it was then all male instructors for the duration of pilot training at United. Through all of this, my husband cheered on my advancements and encouraged me to do more. My boys are now 13 and 15 and think it's cool that their mom flies for the airlines.

My point is, without the positive influence and encouragement of men, I would likely not be where I am today. The vast majority of my experiences with men in aviation have been very encouraging. I know that there is a barrier to females entering aviation, but I don't think it is caused by those currently in aviation. I think it's societal and starts at a very young age. Pilots are men; that is what we are taught at a very young age. I never considered flying until I was a flight attendant, and even then, I was under the impression that most of the pilots were prior military. That is simply incorrect information.

When I look back at my experiences, I realize that female role models have always been especially inspiring to me. The Chief Flight Instructor at THAC before me was female, which led me to not think it was unusual for a woman to oversee 20 plus male flight instructors. I have looked up to airshow performers Suzanne Oliver and Patti Wagstaff, more than any of the male performers. I have been told several times by female students in the classroom that they are inspired by me, as a woman with a family and a career in aviation. And now with FAST, I know there are thousands of other women going through the same experiences I am. While men were often helpful and encouraging to me, it was the female pilots that I looked up to the most. It helped me reach my goals, knowing that women before me had done it, and thrived in the process. There is a vast need for pilots, regardless of gender. I think the more we can normalize women in aviation, the less lopsided the percentages will be, and the more little girls that grow up loving Wonder Woman and her invisible jet will consider aviation as a realistic career.