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Forty years in the air



Retired commercial pilot Nina Anderson, of Sheffield, is pictured in the cockpit of Lyon Aviation's Hawk 800 at Pittsfield Municipal Airport. The Hawk, shown in photo below, is the plane she flew for 27 years. She has written a book, 'Flying Above the Glass Ceiling,' about women in aviation.

Cockpit pioneer

To meet the author

Nina Anderson will be signing copies of "Flying Above the Glass Ceiling" at Chapters Bookstore in Pittsfield on Aug. 22 at 4 p.m.

The author and several of the female pilots featured in the book will also be at the New England Air Museum on Nov. 8.



'The resistance was surprising. I just assumed because I was qualified, I would get hired.'

Nina Anderson

Nina Anderson overcame bias hurdles to be a pilot

By Lisa La Plante, Special to the Eagle

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GREAT BARRINGTON

When Sheffield resident Nina Anderson began flying airplanes professionally, she was only allowed to transport mail, not people. She said her boss, a man, was afraid of what passengers would think if they saw a woman in the cockpit.

With determination and perseverance, however, Anderson worked her way up, quite literally, in the field she loved and became the first female pilot for Command Airways, which serviced the Pittsfield Airport in the late 1970s, for Air New England out of Boston and, finally, for the Philip Morris Corp. She was also the first woman to hold the rank of captain for Command and Philip Morris.

Now retired, she's had a career that spans more than 40 years and is able to look back on her earlier, more challenging, years with a sense of humor. "I didn't have a clue it would be that difficult," she said. "The resistance was surprising. I just assumed because I was qualified, I would get hired."

Anderson has documented her trials, as well as those of other female pilots in her self-published

book, "Flying Above the Glass Ceiling," which came out in June. She has written 18 books on aviation as well as natural health and environmental issues, publishes her own work and that of a more than dozen other authors through her own company, Safe Goods Publishing here. The company has 50 to 60 titles. Now 64 and accomplished in several fields, she said never imagined when she was beginning her career that her gender would matter. Her naiveté, she added, helped her succeed. "If you believe and live from that belief, it will manifest," she wrote in her book.

She credits much of her determination to her father, Nick Vuyosevich, who began the Jersey City Flying Club with roughly 200 members in 1920. Though his aviation career was cut short by World War II, he passed his love of flight on to his daughter through photos and weekly outings to airports.

Anderson renewed her love of flying after she met her first husband, Neil Shively, a part-time pilot. On their first date, he took her to Kennedy Airport and up in a twin-engine plane, which he let her fly. A teacher of sailing at the time, she fell in love with flying and put most of the money she made from sailing lessons into flying a Cessna 150. She flew solo for the first time in 1967.

When her husband was laid off and money became tight, Anderson stopped flying, but only briefly. She took whatever job she could to pay for her "aviation habit" as she called it, eventually earning her commercial, multi-engine and instrument ratings in 1970. At that point, she said she believed she could get a job as a pilot, but was shocked to find "the good old boy cockpit has no room for women."

"It was a man's world," said one male pilot who was part of it back then. Robert Allardyce, of Pittsfield, who retired in 1985 after 32 years with TWA, said he was aware that women were breaking into the field by the 1980s, but there were none on the senior runs he was flying.

Needing to build flight time to work her way up, Anderson and a few other pilots teamed up to buy a Piper Apache and she started flying cross-country to visit family. At the time, the mid 1970s, she was working for Ted Healy, owner of Panorama Flight Services in White Plains, N.Y., as a dispatcher, secretary, bookkeeper and cashier. She rode as co-pilot on freight runs for a year to build enough flight time to get her Airline Transport Rating. Healy then hired her as a pilot, but only to fly freight, not people. "The big fear was that if passengers saw a woman at the helm they wouldn't

fly that charter company again," she wrote in her book. Then one day, Anderson received her big break, quite by accident. She was delivering a part to a charter plane that was having mechanical difficulties. When she arrived, she found the passengers needed to get to White Plains, but the pilot -- a man -- had to stay with the plane while it was being repaired.

Anderson flew the passengers back herself. None reported anything scary about being flown by a woman, she said.

She then began bombarding the commercial airlines with job applications. But she found that, besides being a woman, she was also -- at the age of 30 -- considered too old. The age limit was increased several times over the years, but Anderson said she was always one year above the limit. Then, in the early years of "equal opportunity laws," many companies, including airlines, began looking for women and minorities and relaxed some rules including age limits.

In 1978, Anderson was hired by Command Airways as first officer on a Twin Otter and Beech 99. She made captain within a year, and was soon hired by Air New England, another regional airline. She continued to dream about flying jets, however.

In her book, she documents the excuses many women heard when denied a pilot's job. Their stories parallel the serious struggles of women in many career fields throughout the 1970s and 80s, Anderson said.

In one interview, Anderson said she was asked how long it would take her to split up the other pilots' families. "My retort was that men are the ones that start the affair. They didn't like that reply, so I quickly got the boot."

Another pilot, Bonnie Tiburzi, was quoted as being asked during a job interview whether she really knew how to get off the runway, or whether she was just waiting for her boyfriend.

A third, Julie Clark, said she was told by Hughes Airwest that there was no ladies room, and no bathroom door at all on the men's room in the dispatch office. Clark told them she would buy them a door and she got the job.

Anderson's big break came in 1980, when the Philip Morris Corporation hired her to fly a jet. As it turned out, Anderson said, the company had an ulterior motive. They used her for public relations -- on television, in press releases and in company newsletters -- to show what an equal opportunity employer they were. At the same time, she said she was forced to deal herself with sexual harassment

by male pilots, because her complaints to management fell on deaf ears. She eventually Philip Morris and went on to fly many types of corporate aircraft into her '60s, retiring in 2008.

"It took a long time before it became a standard routine thing," said pilot James Lortsher of Pittsfield of women in the cockpit. "There were a lot of men who had never seen that before. "The female population (among pilots) is not 50/50," Lortsher said, "but it is increasing."

Still, women only make up 6 percent of all commercial and corporate pilots, according to Anderson's book

Lortsher, who earned his pilot's license in 1972 and is on leave, with a shoulder injury from NetJets, added that the United States is advanced in hiring female pilots than other countries. He said he has only once heard a female voice from a cockpit on British Airways.

Great Barrington resident and private pilot Glenna Blackwell said she has encountered little to no bias when she began flying in 2002. She said that Anderson was her mentor when she was working for her license, flying out of Great Barrington Airport. Both women belong to the local chapter of the Ninety Nines organization, a group which raises money to grant scholarships to women in aviation. Blackwell said she was in her 50s when she took her first flying lesson. She had actually bought the lessons as a college graduation gift for her son, but he had other plans. So she took the lessons herself. "I don't know why I put it off for so long," she said. "From that day forward, I was so immersed in flying. It is wonderful to be up above looking down. It gives you a different perspective." Blackwell said that aviation is still very much a "man's world" but that attitudes toward female pilots seem to have changed. She encourages any woman interested in flying to get involved with an organization like the Ninety-Nines or Women in Aviation and find a mentor.

"Nina has been quite an inspiration to me," said Leila Baroody, another female pilot who flies her own plane out of Great Barrington, often with Anderson.

Baroody, who earned her license in 1976, said she did encounter some male resistance, but added, "If you really want something, you go for it." She mostly flies for pleasure, but at times has taken aerial photographs or helped in environmental planning.

While Anderson retired from her corporate position last year, she continues to fly small planes

out of the Great Barrington Airport from time to time and devotes herself to her writing and publishing career. "It was a lot of fun. It gave me a lot of personal growth," she said.