

Soaring Past the Resistance

LINDA SOLLARS' LIFE PATH INSPIRES OTHERS TO TAKE FLIGHT



When Linda Sollars was a child, so small that she had to stretch to reach the staircase banister, a gust of wind blew her off balance as she raced down the steps. As if in a dream, she felt her feet leave the ground, and her heart rushed like the wings of a startled bird.

That was the moment the Connecticut native knew she was destined to fly.

Though her mother envisioned her as an industrial engineer, and her father referred to pilots as "bus drivers in the sky," Sollars held tight to her aeronautical aspirations.

She dismissed a high school counselor's flight attendant application because it was not about *being* in the sky. It was about commanding an aircraft, feeling the rush of acceleration and relishing the freedom that captivated her.

"It's magical," Sollars says.

Riding a 20-plus-year career as a commercial pilot, the Airbus 320 captain represents a minority in her field. Fewer than 5% of commercial airline pilots are women, and the percentage of female captains dips even lower. While the lack of parity might have had an impact on her career trajectory (she worked in finance for a decade), ultimately, Sollars ended up in a profession that entralls her.

"I love everything about being an airline pilot, even the bag carts and seeing how this whole operation comes together. I get the same kind of thrill as the guy who builds a train station in his basement. What makes planes go up is fascinating, a feat of engineering, creativity and ingenuity."

The JetBlue pilot since 2005 has an indisputably keen attention to detail. She became a licensed Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic so she could handle the upkeep on her aircraft. The former director of the Association of Women in Aviation Maintenance is also certified in electronics technology and holds an Associate in Aviation Maintenance Technology degree. She plans to build an experimental airplane, a wing and a tail at a time, to understand thoroughly the ins and outs of the flying machine.

Her focus on maintenance and safety undoubtedly helped her become a better pilot.

Drawn to Naples because of its active aviation community,



Sollars and her husband, Gordon, split time between a home in the North Carolina mountains and a condo near the Naples airport. She deliberately selected a unit with the best view of approaching airplanes.



Her husband of 27 years, whom she calls "Professor-Doctor-Doctor-Esquire-Esquire," is a soon-to-be-retired professor of business ethics at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her "perfect partner" is also a lifelong learner, who she says, is "brilliant and beautiful and takes care of the stuff that I leave in my wake as I plow through life at blinding speed."

That wake includes globetrotting work on aviation industry safety and trade development initiatives in the U.S. and India. The JetBlue 2015 Volunteer of the Year has traveled to Nepal to rebuild earthquake-damaged homes and install skylights in schools. Motivated by knowledge and exploration, her guiding life principle is to seek fun, travel and adventure.

FLY 'AS IF THE DEVIL DROVE'

Women began flying for major commercial airlines in 1973. Yet, at the time, Sollars had no idea there were options for females. She never had a career day with a pilot, nor did she know any female pilots.

During her high school years, she was not focused on her career at all. Her mother developed cancer, and Sollars became her primary caregiver.

"I learned how to drive before I was 16, so I could take her back and forth to the hospital," Sollars says. Though her mother died when Sollars was 18, the two had a very close relationship, which included "18 extraordinary years that many people do not get in a lifetime."

Told by a counselor that girls could not fly, Sollars chose English at the University of Connecticut, even though her strengths were in math and science. Studying the literary greats Sollars was briefly content to read about flying and moving "as if the devil

greats, Sollars was simply content to read about flying and moving "as if the devil drove," as Jonathan Swift wrote.

Her thoughts were never far from flying. Even the playwrights and authors she studied seemed to encourage her to hold onto, and to race toward, her early dreams.

In 1985, while earning an MBA in Finance and International Business from the University of Connecticut, Sollars started flying privately and built up hours as a charter pilot. She avoided the charter companies that were known within the industry to refuse pilots based on gender.

She overcame obstacles of bias, an industry downturn and certain FAA vision requirements. At age 35, Sollars set a goal: fly for a commercial airline by age 40 or return to Wall Street. In 2001, her 39th year, she was hired and furloughed with a major airline. What she refers to as that "marvelous and terrific" first year turned into a "spectacular career."

Few people so clearly see what they are preordained to become, but Sollars' path lands perfectly with her purpose. Flying allows what she calls her "gypsy heart" to connect passengers to other people, new places and exciting experiences.

She is also driven by a pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement. She hired a life coach who so impacted her professional leadership, skills and personal relationships, she, herself, became a Co-Active Training Institute certified professional coach. She also obtained certifications in nutrition and brain health to mentor others.

The challenges she faced 20 years ago are mostly behind her. She remembers a time when she was flying as first officer for a regional airline alongside a female captain. A couple hurried off the plane when they saw two women in the flight deck.

But times are changing.

Passengers are still surprised when they learn they have a female captain, but Sollars believes that one day, they won't be an anomaly. She credits diminishing discrimination

to organizations such as Women in Aviation; organizations that promote the industry and provide mentorship and scholarship to both women and men.

On a recent air voyage, joined by an all-female crew, Sollars announced to her passengers, "We have a completely 'un-manned' flight."

This time, there were cheers.

"And nobody walked off of the plane," Sollars says.

Soon, she will confront a different kind of trial as she bumps up against the mandatory pilot retirement age of 65.

"My challenge in retirement will be the same as it is now: what to say 'no' to," Sollars says.

A former boss once told her, "You can do anything you want, but you can't do everything." She never really bought into that theory.

ART TAKES FLIGHT

In 2019, Sollars purchased Gallery 206 in the Naples Art District on Shirley Street, leasing space to jewelry designers, painters and photographers. Sollars, herself, is a sculptor (something she learned while transporting her father to an Art for the Blind class). She has donated some of the busts she created to charity. She hopes to expand Gallery 206 to include music jams and backgammon and book club nights.

Proceeds from this venture support the Naples Youth Aviation Project. She promotes the program and hopes to find the time to mentor budding pilots.

For now, her plate is full. She has commercial flights to captain, artists to support, and an experimental airplane to build.

She also wants to learn a new language via emersion, travel in her camper van with Gordon, learn to play the piano and take up paragliding or aerobatics.

"Maybe we'll house-swap to some exotic land," she muses.

And with that, she is off, and like a falcon to the lure, away she flies.

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Naples Youth and Aircrafts

They have obvious aviation expertise, but what do Snoopy, Sister Bertrille from "The Flying Nun" and Endora from "Bewitched" have in common? During the 1960s, they were early role models for airline pilot, Linda Sollars.

The JetBlue captain and art gallery owner wants Naples' youth to have more hands-on mentors, so she supports and promotes the Naples Youth Aviation Project through her business, Gallery 206.

Under the guidance of NYAP mentor pilots and aircraft mechanics, kids ages 11-18 use aeronautics, mechanics, engineering and technology skills to build a Sling 2, a two-seat aircraft, from start to finish.

"Once they've built and flown an airplane, they know they can do anything," Sollars says.

NYAP's mission is to engage kids beyond casual interest to inspiring a pipeline of knowledgeable young people who choose a career in aviation.

For more information, visit NaplesYouthAviationProject.com.



Throw Like a Girl ::
Thriving in Traditionally Male Fields