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- +**
Yes She Can
The unconventional
life of Lisa Turner
- Fairchild Therapy**
A family-style PT-19
- Worth the Wait**
Learning to fly at 58

Spitting
Image
A closer look at a
homebuilt Spitfire



AN
UNCONVENTIONAL
LIFE

TONY BINGELIS AWARD WINNER LISA TURNER

BY HAL BRYAN

“It’s perfectly okay to be unconventional,” said Lisa Turner, EAA 509911, an avionics engineer working on brakes for the Boeing 787 at Moog Components Group in Murphy, North Carolina. If you spend more than five minutes with her, you’ll see that statement is really an understatement. Lisa is the 2015 recipient of the EAA Tony

Bingelis Award and a new member of EAA’s Homebuilt Aircraft Council, and those are just the most recent feathers in an aviation cap that was already full of them.

Lisa has always been fascinated by machines and was born with what some of us call the “transportation gene.” If it moves and it can take you with it, she’s interested. When she was 9 years old, she combined the family lawn mower with her little red wagon and tore through the neighborhood to no one’s delight but her own. An adult neighbor chased after her yelling, “You can’t do that!” Lisa was baffled by this, because, clearly, she was doing it. She called back to the neighbor not to worry: “It’s working fine!” The neighbor’s warnings about sharp blades and other concerns were lost to the din of the engine as she sped away. It wouldn’t be the last time someone who told her she couldn’t do something was proven wrong.

After her father left when she was just 6 years old, the task of raising Lisa fell solely to her mother, whose encouragement would prove to be a key component of an unconventional life. Lisa’s mother encouraged her to be whatever she wanted with no pressure on her to do or be anything that might be considered “typical.” While some of Lisa’s peers were playing with dolls, she was busy building forts. When she was bored in home economics class, she convinced a guidance counselor to let her take shop—no common thing in the 1960s.

While Lisa describes her childhood self as “something of a delinquent,” her mother’s advice convinced her that she could do anything. But the most important piece of advice Lisa’s mother ever offered was to concentrate in school. Tragically, her mother passed away when Lisa was just 12 years old. Recounting this story now, Lisa can’t overstate the impact it had, describing it with an engineer’s precision as a “significant emotional event.”



GIRLS IN AVIATION DAY NASHVILLE 2016

This unique event for girls ages 10–17 is scheduled for Saturday, March 12, in Nashville, Tennessee, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Activities planned for the day include flying a simulator, getting hands-on with aircraft mechanic tools, testing your own aeronautical designs, learning about aviation careers, and so much more. Space is limited; visit www.EAA.org/sportaviation and click on This Month’s Extras to register. Sponsored by Women in Aviation International.



To say that Lisa took her mother's advice is, once again, an understatement: As of now, she holds a doctorate in science from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a Bachelor of Arts in English and philosophy from Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland, a Master of Business, also from Nova Southeastern University, and an associate of science degree in engineering from Palm Beach State College. Not to mention numerous professional certifications, including a residential builder license and a 50-ton Coast Guard captain's license.

After graduating from college—the first time, that is—Lisa started a bicycle repair business while at the same time taking the first steps toward pursuing another “transportation passion”: flying. She soloed a Piper Cherokee 140 in 1975. If the idea of a bicycle mechanic learning to fly reminds you of a couple of famous brothers from Dayton, Ohio, you're not the only one to spot that connection. When asked, Lisa modestly downplays the comparison, but admits that she certainly shares a similar “set of obsessions” with Orville and Wilbur.

Flying, unfortunately, was going to have to wait a while. Twenty years, to be precise. After Lisa had expanded her bicycle business to include working on motorcycles and cars, she sold it to go back to school and study engineering. It wasn't that she didn't love aviation, just that all-too-familiar refrain about flying being expensive, not to mention life's habit of getting in the way. Once she'd graduated—again—Lisa entered the corporate world as an electronics technician and then transitioned into training and development.

Throughout this period, she said there was one thing she kept hearing from corporate co-workers in her position as an instructor and trusted adviser: “I wish I was...” She encountered many people who were successful but not truly happy, and found herself giving them the same basic advice: Find what you love, and you'll be great at it. In 1995 she was living in Lantana, Florida, by happy coincidence under the traffic pattern of a nearby airport. Seeing airplanes overhead every day eventually did the trick, so 20 years after her solo, Lisa took her own advice and

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finished her private pilot training and got her certificate.

Lisa was thrilled to finally fly, but it wasn't enough: She needed to build. She started researching various kit designs, and after a visit to Sun 'n Fun that same year, narrowed her choices down to one, a Pulsar XP. The Pulsar is a sleek, composite, low-wing two-seater that was produced by Aero Designs in San Antonio, Texas.

Exactly 1,834 hours and 20 months later, Lisa test flew her Pulsar XP, reaching another milestone in a life that's proven to be full of them. With this, Lisa was officially a homebuilder, and loved it. It wasn't long before she knew she had to dive into another project. She loved working with composites to build the Pulsar, but her second project needed to be something different. Her choice, a Kolb Twinstar Mark III, was definitely different. Not only was she trading composites for tube-and-fabric, she was going from a sleek, 120-plus knot cross-country cruiser to a simple and honest tail-dragger that operated at a sedate 65 knots.

Why the seemingly drastic change? There are two reasons: The first is that Lisa wanted to learn a different construction method, not surprising from someone with a seemingly insatiable thirst for education. The second reason is that both airplanes, the streamlined Pulsar and the low-and-slow Kolb, used the same engine, an 80-hp Rotax 912. The idea that two aircraft, so visually dissimilar with such different missions would use an identical powerplant was something that she found fascinating.

Before she could really get going on the Kolb, Lisa needed to know how to work with fabric covering, so, once again, she was off to school. This time, she attended an EAA SportAir Workshop in late 1999 where she not only learned what she needed for her project, but she and the instructor, Jerry

Stadtmiller, EAA 1037356, grew to be best friends, and were married four years later.

The Kolb build was well-documented on the web, as was the Pulsar. With one airplane already under her belt, and years of engineering experience, Lisa did a lot more custom work on the Kolb than she had on the Pulsar. She created a custom aluminum fuel tank and added a small auxiliary tank. She designed a unique electrical system and built a special overhead panel in the cockpit. The Kolb first flew in 2006, and she enjoyed it immensely. When it came time to sell the airplane, a Kolb fan who'd followed the build closely on her website snapped it up immediately.

Lisa's passion for building coupled with her natural gifts as a teacher and adviser soon found her teaching workshops and forums for EAA, as well as writing for numerous publications including our own *Sport Aviation* and *Experimenter*, as well as *Kitplanes* magazine. Through her writing and public speaking, she's inspired countless people to finish projects of their own. She comments, “I'd have people coming up to me at air shows and fly-ins saying how I made a difference in their own life or a family member's life by saying anyone could do anything they wanted if they'd just set goals and go about achieving them with discipline and planning.”

In 2001, Lisa became an EAA technical counselor and has assisted on well more than 100 projects over the years. She's current to this day, but her work schedule demands that she limit her builder visits. In addition to helping with the building side as a technical counselor, Lisa also takes part in the EAA Flight Advisor program. She says, “As a builder you get so excited about your first flight. You've dreamt of the first flight moment since beginning the build. That intense excitement can warp your sense of logic and judgment when it's time to test the aircraft. I would try to make sure the builder had all of the checks and double-checks completed and was personally ready to fly their new aircraft. I also suggested to a few builders that they identify a more experienced pilot to do the first flight, and they were relieved.”

In 2002, while working alongside her husband, Jerry, restoring antique biplanes, she began studying to get her airframe and powerplant certification, which she completed in 2004. She and her husband also

became instructors for the E-LSA inspection course, which they teach on-site at their commercial hangar, home of their restoration business, Bipe Inc.

In recognition of her passionate commitment to and support for all aspects of homebuilding, EAA was proud to award Lisa the Tony Bingelis Award at AirVenture Oshkosh in 2015. This award recognizes EAA technical counselors for dedicated service and/or significant contributions in assisting members to build and restore aircraft. Lisa was nominated by Justin Griffin, EAA 1041491, who wrote that “Lisa's contagious passion for reaching the dream of building or restoring an aircraft rubs off on everyone around her.”

When we told Lisa about the award, it inevitably came up that she was the first woman to have received it since its inception in 2003. “It means so much,” she said. “What I do has traditionally been considered ‘men's work’ but hopefully I can demonstrate that a woman can do whatever she wants, given the right discipline and planning.” She was quick to point out that gender really isn't all that relevant. “All of us have had adversity in our lives. All of us have stories, things we've overcome. It's important at some point to not identify with a special group, but remember that we're all human beings. No matter who we are, we've all been through difficult experiences. Adversity is a given.”

In addition to the Tony Bingelis Award, EAA presented Lisa with an invitation: We wanted her to join our Homebuilt Aircraft Council, a volunteer group whose mission is to ensure the organization's continued focus on vital programs of benefit to current and future homebuilders. At first, she wasn't sure if she could afford the time commitment, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized this was a natural extension of what she's spent her life doing: helping other people in the pursuit of their passions. This was encouragement writ large, teaching on a grand, even global, scale. As she said, “This is the pinnacle of helping people reach their dreams.” Not to mention the fact that EAA CEO Jack J. Pelton “just wouldn't take no for an answer!”

As for what Lisa is building today, the answer seems surprising: nothing. Instead, she's using the time she'd normally devote to an aircraft build to write a book. Entitled

FOUR DAYS OF EMPOWERMENT FOR YOUNG WOMEN

EAA's Women Soar *You Soar* program, held July 24–27, 2016, is a day camp that will introduce young women to both the aviation and aerospace fields. This is ideal for girls grades 9–12, giving them the opportunity to expand their horizons if flying an airplane, soaring into space, or using their math and science skills as an aviation engineer is part of their future. Mentored by 25 women who work in a variety of aviation fields, participants will explore, discover, get inspired, and have fun. To enroll, visit www.EAA.org/womensoar to download the registration form or call 800-564-6322 for a registration packet.

Dream Take Flight, the book is a collection of her aircraft building and flying adventures, as well as her advice on reaching goals. She's writing it to encourage others to pursue their dreams, whatever they are. You can bet that this book, along with all of her other work, will inspire all kinds of people to build and fly projects of their own. So, while she may not be hands-on with a project right now, homebuilts will be built and flown that likely wouldn't otherwise.

That said, when asked if she plans on building again, Lisa's answer is an unequivocal yes. As for what her next project might be, the high-energy enthusiasm of her response provides the perfect counterpoint to her innate engineer's discipline. “I would love to go back to composites, and then maybe do a helicopter (Lisa sold an unfinished RotorWay kit several years ago). And I'd really love to do an electric ultralight, oh, and an Arion Lightning!”

We won't be surprised if she builds all of those and then some. As she herself said, and has proven many times over, “If we can make up our mind to follow our dreams, we'll find a way to get there.” If that way seems unconventional, so much the better. *EAA*

Hal Bryan, EAA Lifetime 638979, is senior editor for EAA publications and a lifelong pilot and aviation geek. He's logged time in a variety of types, most of them old and weird, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Find him on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/halbryan or e-mail him at hbryan@eaa.org.



Watch for Lisa's book in 2017— *Dream Take Flight*— the story of how Lisa fell in love with unconventional adventures and built and flew the Pulsar XP. Read excerpts by going to DreamTakeFlight.com. Contact: Lisa@dreamtakeflight.com