



*Lexington-Born Aviator
Soars in Her Field*

Sky's THE LIMIT

By Debra Gibson | Photos by Bill Luster

Arlynn McMahon, chief of the flight school and aviation center Aero-Tech Inc., arrives with palpable energy. Her long hair, the color of corn silk, falls loosely behind a black aviator's jacket. Her sky-blue eyes smile from behind dark-rimmed glasses.

McMahon darts off to finish some quick business and then settles into a chair overlooking Blue Grass Airport's general aviation area, home to non-commercial and non-military air traffic.

It's also home to Aero-Tech and for McMahon, a 52-year-old Lexington native who has changed the way aspiring pilots learn to fly small planes.

During McMahon's 38 years at the controls, she has flown to 49 states and eight countries, taught more than 1,000 people to fly, and written two books for flight instructors. She has helped create a flight school cited as a national model, and she has been recognized with general aviation's top national awards for flight instructors.

The other side of the airport

McMahon did not set out to be a trailblazer, however. She did not intentionally become part of the mere 6 percent of pilots

who are women or the 6 percent of flight instructors who are women. Becoming a pilot was never even a pressing dream.

"I always knew Lexington had an airport," McMahon said, "but I never knew the airport had another side [general aviation]. When I saw people using small planes for transportation, to help people, for real utility, that's when I became interested in it."

A young McMahon caught a glimpse of that side of the airport at 14 while riding her bicycle with a friend. Her friend knew a shortcut home through the backside of the airport. As they crossed, McMahon saw a man working on one of the small planes.

"I'll wash the plane for you if you will take me for a ride," she boldly offered. McMahon had a deal.

Not long afterward, McMahon's father, Arlis, enrolled in flight school, believing that aviation was a tool to grow his construction business.

"I don't have anything to do," McMahon told her father one night. "Can I go with you?"

There she met Charlie Monette, who taught ground school (preparation for the Federal Aviation Administration knowledge exam) from his basement. Soon McMahon officially joined the group. Not long after that, father and daughter passed their FAA knowledge exams. McMahon was 15, the youngest age at which a person can take the test.

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A lifelong passion discovered

Having obtained his license, Arlis purchased a Cessna 182 for his business. McMahon was also able to use the single-engine plane for her flight training. After she soloed, she began making flights for her dad's company.

On her 17th birthday McMahon earned her pilot's license and her parents' permission to fly three friends to Niagara Falls for the Fourth of July weekend. This was before cell phones, so the main rule was that the four teenagers were to be home by 6 p.m. on Sunday.

"We took off on Friday," McMahon recalled, "and it was a beautiful flight with no problems. We went to see the falls, but after three or four hours we were bored. There wasn't that much else to do."

McMahon looked at an aeronautical map.

"We had come about this far," she said, positioning her thumb and index finger to create a two-inch space. "It was about the same distance to New York City." They checked out of the mo-

tel and took off for the Big Apple, figuring if their parents had let them fly this far, they wouldn't mind them flying the same distance to New York City.

Meanwhile, McMahon's parents called the motel at Niagara Falls only to discover that the high schoolers had left for parts unknown, for reasons unknown.

"We pulled up 10 minutes early on Sunday," McMahon said of the return flight. "We were so proud of ourselves for getting home on time, but our parents were waiting in the airport lobby.

"Very quickly there were some rules about my flying," she recalled. "It must have been difficult for them to find the right balance. I still had a lot of freedom, but I also had a lot of strings."

Despite the restrictions McMahon knew then that flying would define her life. The joys of flying — freedom, adventure, friendship — proved intoxicating. McMahon was no longer just a 17-year-old senior at Tates Creek High School: She was, and would always be, a pilot.

Down from the clouds

In 1977 McMahon graduated from high school. She then earned a two-year computer science degree from Fugazzi College and went to work for Jerrico, the Lexington-based company that owned Long John Silver's.

"I worked in the data center," McMahon said. "Back then the computers were huge and had to be kept cool, so they were usually in the basement. We also normally worked third shift so our work didn't interfere with the business."

"I hated it," McMahon said.

The highlight of those years was continuing her flight instruction. McMahon earned her instrument rating, her commercial pilot certificate, and then her flight instructor rating.

The world opens up

McMahon also set a goal: fly to 49 of the 50 states in the Cessna. "I figured it would be difficult to fly a small plane to Hawaii," she said, "but everywhere else was doable."

She tacked a map on her wall and began checking off states.

Many of the trips were made with friends, such as a trip to Alaska with 13 friends and three planes. Along the way they stopped in South Dakota to see Mount Rushmore and in Wyoming to see Jackson Hole. There were stops at Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Tetons, as well as Mt. St. Helens before the volcano blew.

"Flying opened up the world for me," McMahon said. "All these things I had only seen in textbooks, I could now see in person. I went scuba diving in Cancun and Christmas shopping at the Mall of the Americas. I went sailing off of Washington State."

McMahon accomplished her original goal and then flew into all of Canada's territories, explored the Caribbean, and traveled to several countries in South America.



McMahon: "Flying opened up the world for me."

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The flights were exhilarating; her job wasn't. With no guarantee of income, McMahon quit her computer job in 1984 to grow Aero-Tech, the company Monette had started in 1974. At that point Aero-Tech was nothing more than one plane and a phone number. Now Aero-Tech had its first employee in McMahon and its first brick-and-mortar location.

Monette already had a full-time job at IBM, so it was up to McMahon to build the business.

"I showed up at 8 a.m. the first day because that is what time work starts," McMahon recalled. "There was one chair. I sat down in it and started making lists of ideas and things I wanted to remember. Then I started calling the few ground school students we had. A lot of them were business owners. I asked them



Tyler Probst is one of more than 1,000 students Arlynn McMahon has taught to fly.

if they knew of others who might need our services, and then I interviewed my dad and a lawyer to find out what I didn't know about running a business."

When she was finished, McMahon had created a circle of people to help her and a list of people who wanted to learn to fly.

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"She was just the best teacher," said George Hill, a student of McMahon's. At the time, Hill was with Walmac, a Lexington horse farm with one of the largest breeding and stallion operations in Kentucky. Flying made it much easier for him to visit yearlings at other horse farms.

"Getting a license can be daunting," Hill recalled. "She kept pushing me through the process and the challenges that came up, be it navigation or whatever. She emphasized safety. I am a safe pilot, and I know that. That makes me a confident pilot."

Creating one confident pilot after another helped Aero-Tech succeed. Then one day the head of the airport board asked if Aero-Tech would like to become the airport's official flight school. McMahon never had to return to computer science.

National recognition

McMahon's excellence as an instructor earned her the coveted FAA National Certified Flight Instructor of the Year in 2009.

With tough national competition, it takes more than excellent instruction to be nominated, much less win the award, according to JoAnn Hill, president of Master Instructors LLC in



McMahon shows Probst how to check the equipment before he takes the controls.

Longmont, Colo., and a judge for the competition that year. Hill (no relation to George Hill) is now national chair of the recognition program.

"Arlynn set up a model program for training flight instructors at her school," Hill said. "She also worked on the FITS program (FAA Industry Training Standards), a partnership between the FAA, industry, and academia to enhance general aviation safety.

McMahon's writing also helped.

Train Like You Fly! A Flight Instructors Guide to Scenario-based Training was the first book she wrote. The second, *Lesson Plans to Train Like You Fly*, provides practical ways to implement scenario-based training.

She was recognized again in 2009, this time for excellence in pilot training by the National Air Transportation Association. Jim Gardner, president of James A. Gardner Company, an Atlanta-based aviation insurance agency, nominated McMahon.

"When it comes to Arlynn and the school she and Charlie have built, there is probably not a better one in the country although there are a lot of good programs," Gardner said. "They teach private pilots how to think and operate aircraft in a professional manner and teach them in a way that their students incorporate this professionalism into their

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everyday flying activity. It doesn't get any better than how Arlynn does it."

McMahon also continued her own education. In the mid-1990s she earned a bachelor's degree from Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Louisville, Ky., through its distance-learning program. In addition, she earned a master's degree in strategic management online from Texas-based Amberton University in 2000.

Still a few challenges left

Of late, McMahon has been extensively involved in SAFE, the Society of Aviation Flight Educators. SAFE develops flight-training programs aimed at attracting more people to aviation as a hobby, a daunting task during tough economic times.

She continues to expand Aero-Tech, which has grown to in-

clude pilot testing, aviation supplies, aircraft rental, and a second location in Jamestown, Ky. which is a full-service fixed operation, meaning it provides everything transient pilots need, including fuel, weather reports, and aircraft maintenance.

McMahon also became a captain in the Coast Guard and is licensed to handle boats less than 200 tons in open water.

"There are a lot of similarities between sailing and flying," McMahon said. "We like to take our student pilots to Florida to teach them to sail because in a boat you can see how the parts work together whereas you can't see that in a plane. I got that license to make sure we were following all the Coast Guard rules."

Five years ago McMahon and Monette married, and they now run Aero-Tech together.

"General aviation is a huge, huge industry," she said. "We are providing a source of transportation for goods that airlines can't get to and can't do profitably. General aviation is a starting place for pilots, where most of them learn. It's important for the Civil Air Patrol, the border patrol, the Coast Guard, and the FBI. You don't need an F16 to do everything."

McMahon's resolve is unmistakable, her enthusiasm barely contained as she sits up taller in her chair as though challenged from an unseen force. Her blue eyes are once again animated, much as they must have been when she was 17 and deciding that a quick jaunt to New York City was a good idea. ✈️

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