

NEXTDOOR

By Shelli Bond

SUSAN VAN FLEET

"Some people look up at the sky and want to fly."

Susan Van Fleet believes the desire to fly is genetic—there is something in pilots from the time they are children. She remembers jumping off her porch as a child, holding an umbrella and falling in a heap to the ground. But she tried. She tried to fly.

Susan has just received her membership in the Silver Wings, an aviation association of pilots who have been flying for at least 25 years. For her, there is nothing else like the freedom of flight, that moment when she is no longer bound to the earth.

An emergency room nurse at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Susan lives in Athens and teaches flying at Athens-Ben Epps Airport.

She was born in New Haven, Conn., where her father was doing postdoctoral studies in botany at Yale. He has been one of the major influences in her life, always encouraging her to follow her dreams. "But I did not know he was afraid of flying until after I got my pilot's license. He never flew with me, but he encouraged me to fly," Susan says.

It was her mother's side of the family who loved to fly, and Susan says that her mother has a built-in compass that assists them whenever she takes her flying.

Susan came to Athens during college when her father, the late Dick Scott Van Fleet, became chairman of

the University of Georgia botany department. Her mother, Chris, remains active in the community.

Although she did not get her license until she was 29 years old, Susan's first flight took off from a small grass strip in Massachusetts, where her family lived for a couple of years, when she was 15. A friend's brother was the pilot.

Susan says that although she has kept in touch with some friends from Massachusetts, she didn't return until last year with her 17-year-old daughter, Shannon Shropshire, a student at Georgia Tech.

They spent the whole day looking for the grass strip. "I had written a friend who was the president of the EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association), and he sent me a map of areas where that grass strip could have been. My daughter and I drove all day, but we didn't find it.

"Finally we gave up and stopped at a small airport to use the telephone. There we met an old man who said he started flying before World War II. I asked him if he knew R.K. Patrick, the man who took me flying. This old man said, 'He was my best friend.'"

Shannon was delighted when he told them that it had been his grass strip from which Susan had flown and also his plane. The strip had been gone for years, but he told her where it was and what kind of plane she had flown in—a Stenson Reliant.

"My daughter said, 'Mom, you found your roots!'"

Although Susan's first love is flying, she has a career in health care. She worked as Athens Regional Medical Center's first registered dietitian for four years and then as a pharmaceutical representative for another four years.

Between her years in health care, from about 1987 to 1991, Susan flew as copilot for the University of Georgia. The job landed in her lap because she had the credentials: a multi-engine and commercial license and qualification in the type of airplane, a Cessna 421.

After a divorce in 1993, Susan went to nursing school. She says her background in dietetics helps her as a nurse in the Trauma Center and, ironically, flying is what keeps her grounded.

"Nursing, especially in the emergency room, is extremely stressful. I





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think many nurses make the mistake of taking their patients home with them. The minute I walk out of the hospital, I look up at the sky and see if there are any airplanes out there. I'm thinking about who I'm flying with tomorrow, who I'm going to teach."

Her flying, her nursing and, most important, her daughter balance her life, and she loves them all. "I'm glad I didn't stay in dietetics, that I didn't just flight instruct or nurse. I like that," Susan says. "One of my frequent discussions with my father was whether I should be well rounded or specialize in something. We never came to a decision."

Susan likes to tell people that if they have a dream, they must go for it. "It takes patience and sacrifice. When I was in nursing school, I rarely flight instructed and, of course, money was an issue. But there are ways, perhaps through scholarships, that you can do it. You have to find a way," she says.

"If someone wants to fly, I believe that there is something way back inside them that will enable them to do it, but they have to pursue it. As a teacher, I think I can teach them, but will they

learn? You never know."

She grins. "But I believe I can teach anyone how to fly."

Bringing someone to the point of his or her first solo flight is just as exciting for the teacher as for the student, she says. "You relive your solo again. You have taken someone who has never been in an airplane before and taught him how to fly."

Besides flight instructing, Susan is involved in five aviation organizations, including the Silver Wings. She belongs to the Women's International Pilot's Association, also known as the 99s women's group, started by Amelia Earhart in 1929 with 99 women. Now it has over 7,000 members.

Another group Susan belongs to is the Flying Rebels, which meets every month in different locations, such as Key West, Charleston or Albuquerque. Susan says what they do is fly, eat good food and talk about flying.

The Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) is a national group that promotes aviation, and Susan belongs to the Gainesville chapter, which has 140 members. They take children for rides and even build aircraft. The

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Pictured in front from left to right: Jennifer DiVello, Robyn Felder, Jolene Tarpley, Rebecca Watkins, Regina Brown, Tami Garrison, Kelly Coker, Yolanda Miranda-Hill, Lindsey Jarrett, Laura Gilliam; Back from left to right: Bill Schroth, Mike Burns, Joe Taylor, Chris Lloyd, Mayson Ransom, Laurel Alberry, Andy Homeyer, Kirk Dunham, Mike Fitzgerald, Stewart Richardson, Lou Perno, Jon Cook, Johnny Scoggins, Lani Hardman

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national organization has also sponsored large air shows like the ones in Osh Kosh, Wis., and Lakeland, Fla.

The Central Savannah River Aviation Group (CSRA) is also an educational organization that meets once a month. With approximately 150 members, it creates a social atmosphere for pilots, but it also sponsors rides for children and helps people who want to learn how to fly.

Susan loves the South because so much goes on in aviation here that does not in other parts of the United States. There are 117 airports in Georgia alone. "The great thing about Georgia is that the weather permits us to fly year round. There are breakfast clubs with breakfast fly-ins on Sunday mornings, air shows and numerous other get-togethers."

Susan has participated in the Powder Puff Derby, a 3,000-mile air race for women that started in the 1930s and is held in various locations in the U.S. One year a man entered the race, to the agitation of the other participants, who were delighted when he got lost on the first leg of the flight. Now the race is called the Air Race Classic, an invitational race for women only.

Although she has been in the top 10 in several races, the only time Susan has won a race was as a student in 1971 at Athens-Ben Epps Airport, where she learned to fly. As a student, Susan had to practice her landings over and over again but, unlike other students, she regularly flew to surrounding airports in Georgia for practice. She got to know the different airports and how to get to them.

There were 15 to 20 participants in that race, which began at Ben Epps Airport, and each was given a piece of paper with the name of a Georgia airport written on it. The contestants had to fly to that airport, where they received the name of their next destination and so on. The last airport was the finish line, and Susan showed up first.

Susan had not needed to use navigational equipment because she already knew how to get to each airport. This method of navigating by using landmarks and roads without any equipment is called pilotage, and Susan still encourages her students to learn how to do this in case their equipment fails.

Although this and subsequent

races have given her a lot of pleasure, Susan says, "It's not about winning. It's about competing with yourself. I like to do this in my own airplane." Her elegant aircraft is a Taisun 17E motor glider made in Munich, Germany. With a 56-foot wingspan and an 80-horsepower engine, it uses 3-1/2 to 4 gallons of fuel an hour, a comparatively small amount.

Long before Susan owned the glider, she had a Cessna 172, but she sold it and used rental planes for several years. In 1984, she was in Macon and saw

what to her was the perfect airplane—a motorized glider. Up until then, she did not know they existed. A friend inspected the glider with her for quite some time, noticing the retractable gears and its slick outward appearance. She fell in love.

After two more years of using rental planes, Susan decided it was time to buy another airplane. She did not know the name of the glider that she had seen in Macon, but she looked around at every available one. She never found quite what she was looking for.



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"Finally I hooked up with a guy in Minden, Nev., who had a glider that sounded like what I wanted. My mechanic lived in Macon, and I wanted him to go to Nevada so that he could look at the airplane before I bought it. This was not feasible, however, so I went by myself and bought it."

She says that the flight back to Georgia was one of her best experiences in flying. She stopped once in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. "When I left, I had to circle for 45 minutes in order to gain enough altitude to clear the pass. The pass was 12,000 feet and I was able to cross it at 13,500 feet. It was thrilling. Pike's Peak was out there in front of me for over an hour. I never felt so tiny in my life."

Back in Georgia, she took her new plane to her mechanic and together they pulled out the plane's log book. They were both surprised to find that this was the very same airplane that had so attracted Susan back in 1984. And her mechanic's signature was written in the log book.

"That plane is part of me, but I will never master that aircraft. It can do so much more than I can. But there is always that goal. For 20 or 30 years I will fly that airplane, and each time I fly I feel I am getting better. It will soar."

Susan has reached her goal—to work three 12-hour shifts per week in the Trauma Center. This gives her four days a week free, two of which she uses to teach flying. She usually has two to four students at a time.

Flying is popular, but it's expensive, according to Susan. Many people who may want to learn are dissuaded by the cost to obtain a private license, \$3,500 to \$4,500. And this is just the beginning for someone who may want to fly for an airline someday.

"Aviation is doing well now," Susan says, "but if we don't get more people started flying, it could suffer in the next 20 years."

Susan has come a long way from the child who jumped off her porch with an umbrella, but she is living proof that patience, perseverance and following your heart is worth it.

Remember what Susan tells each of her students: "Fly."

Shelli Bond is a freelance writer living in Athens.