

BUSINESS

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The Executive File

Wings of the Cascades still flying high

By Cathy Carroll
The Bulletin

Mary Schu, president and chief pilot for Wings of the Cascades Spirit Flight in Redmond, has been teaching people to fly for 25 years. The native of Rosalia, Wash., worked as a pilot around the country but was determined to return to the Northwest and open a flight school. A decade ago, she packed up her two young daughters and left Kansas for Central Oregon. Today her school employs a staff of seven and flies six Cessna aircraft. Two Citation Mustang jets are on order for 2007.

How did you get started?

I took a really unusual route from the bottom to the top and back to the middle in salary and prestige. I was a special education teacher specializing in learning disabilities, and on my summers off, I wanted high adventure. When I got up front to fly a plane I knew right then I'd have to fly a plane for a living. I must do it every week or I get kind of weird. It's my vocation — my passion. It's like breathing.

How long did it take you to become a pilot?

A year and a half after my first flight lesson. I was working full time and I flew full time. I was on the fast track to get it done, flying four to five times a week. It was pretty intense. I like going fast.

What jobs did you have during your career?

After a year and a half of flight school, I was hired by the company where I did my training and was teaching other peo-



Melissa Johnson / The Bulletin

Mary Schu, president and chief pilot for Wings of the Cascades Spirit Flight in Redmond, gives lessons in aircraft such as this Cessna 172.

ple. I was "Marian Air" for traffic watch radio (in Portland), saying, "There's a pileup today in the left lane and it's slow on

the Terwilliger curves." I did that for six months and got a job in California.

I was flying a corporate jet for

a gas and oil development company, New Petroleum Corp. of Burbank. The corporate jet flew at 520 mph. The fastest plane I had ever flown before then flew up to 200 mph.

How fast is that compared with a typical commercial airliner?

Five hundred twenty mph is right up there with the speed of most airlines. It's fast for a corporate jet.

What was one of your most memorable flights?

I was flying at 19,000 feet in Colorado in February and the entire front of the co-pilot's window blew out. It was a seven-passenger Cessna 421. They don't know why it fractured and blew out. It caused an explosive decompression which causes you to lose pressurization. It was like a shotgun going off. At pressurization at high altitude, the body thinks it's below 10,000 feet. Pressurization is like blowing up a balloon inside the airplane. ... It blew up all my potato chip bags. It looked like a party because potato chip pieces and Cheetos were all over the cabin. It was really quite a sight.

I made an emergency descent. At 19,000 feet above sea level you have five minutes of useful consciousness, but I was not as concerned about passing out as I was of freezing.

I had to turn around and fly back. It was 32 (degrees) below zero Celsius (about 64 degrees below zero Fahrenheit). There was a 250-knot wind-chill factor. It was just breathtaking, like your body was slammed between two bricks at that first breath.

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Flight School offers two- and four-year degrees

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There was a lot of adrenaline going on, and a pilot is like a well-programmed computer. My training did what it needed to do. It was 40 minutes, a long trip back to the airport. I was in thermal shock. They had to drag

me off but I did see the potato chips all over as they were dragging me off.

What training do you offer?

Through Utah Valley State College in Provo, Utah, we can offer a two- and four-year aviation degree. You can do the classwork from home on the Internet and two to three hours a day flying. We have full financing of student loans and federal assistance for college training.

Anyone who wants to fly for a

major airline must have a four-year degree.

How much does that cost?

A four-year degree is \$70,000. That sounds like a lot until you look at private school. Tuition is \$40,000 a year. With an aviation degree you can start working as a flight instructor after your first two years.

What has been the key to success in your business?

Being diversified. In winter we are in the air as much as possible.

We teach ground school and have simulator training. All public high school students can receive high school credit in our School-To-Career program. My school is one of 32 in the country that is approved to teach flight instructor refresher clinics.