



Happy landings

Since she was 12, Diane Earhart has loved everything about flying. Five years ago, multiple sclerosis threatened her career as an air traffic controller. She continues to soar Page 6



How we met

Diana Clark of Millstadt dialed the wrong number 30 years ago. Somehow, it all turned out right. ... Page 3,

Try out the new sweats

Columnist Patrick Kuhl learns the ropes at the Y ... Page 8



On the job

Customers and cash make the job interesting for bank teller Raina Schlichting ... Page 10

Cleared for takeoff

Air traffic controller Diane Earhart keeps her head in the clouds

BY MICHELLE MEEHAN
Sunday Magazine

Diane Earhart has never been typical. She learned to fly before she learned to drive. Then she changed her name.

"A lot of people think I fly because my name is Earhart," the 42-year-old air traffic controller explained. "But my name is Earhart because I fly. I wanted a name that said something about who I was as a person."

She briefly considered Lindbergh, settling on Earhart after much soul searching. Amelia Earhart, after all, was the first female pilot to successfully fly solo across the Atlantic. She disappeared at sea while attempting an unprecedented around-the-world flight in 1937.

"It's not because I'm trying to emulate Amelia," said Diane, who took the name following a 1991 divorce. "It's just because the name is recognizable."

It conjures up images of blue skies and fluffy clouds.

Soaring high and following your dreams.



DIANE MADE HER FIRST SOLO FLIGHT ON HER 16TH BIRTHDAY, FEB. 24, 1973.

"There's a Stephen King story I always go back to," said Diane, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1995. "The story is called 'The Apt Pupil.' It talks about your great interest and how, when you find it, you know it."

Diane stumbled on her passion while still in grade school.

"My dad got his pilot's license when I was 12," she recalled three decades later. "I remember the first time I went flying with him. Two minutes before, I didn't know what I was going to do. Two minutes after, my life was totally defined."

At age 15, Diane started taking flying lessons. She logged her first solo flight on her 16th birthday and earned her pilot's license at 17 — the earliest age allowed by the federal aviation

regulations.

"In high school, I was renting a plane that was \$18 an hour and I was making \$1.85 working at the mall," she remembered and smiled. "Years later, I was making \$15 an hour and renting an airplane that was \$150 an hour. I thought, 'It never stops! The ratio is always the same!'"

In 1982, after working six years as a secretary, Diane — who kept a sign on her typewriter that read, "I'd Rather Be Flying" — became an air traffic controller. She immediately moved from her hometown of Madison, Wis., to Belleville, taking a job at St. Louis Downtown-Parks Airport in Cahokia.

"I love my job," said Diane, widening her luminous green eyes. "Actually, the most stressful thing about being an air traffic controller is everybody saying,

'Oh what a stressful job!' I have a friend who's a nurse. She says, 'There's not enough money in the world to make me be an air traffic controller.' I say, 'There's not enough money in the world to make me be a nurse.'

"It's all about what you like to do and what you're good at."

Sitting high in the air traffic control tower, Diane looks totally at ease. On a recent morning, she shared the space with two other air traffic controllers, monitoring blips on the digital bright radar tower equipment and looking out the window for incoming planes.

Her days are not always so care-free.

Like the skies, life can be turbulent.

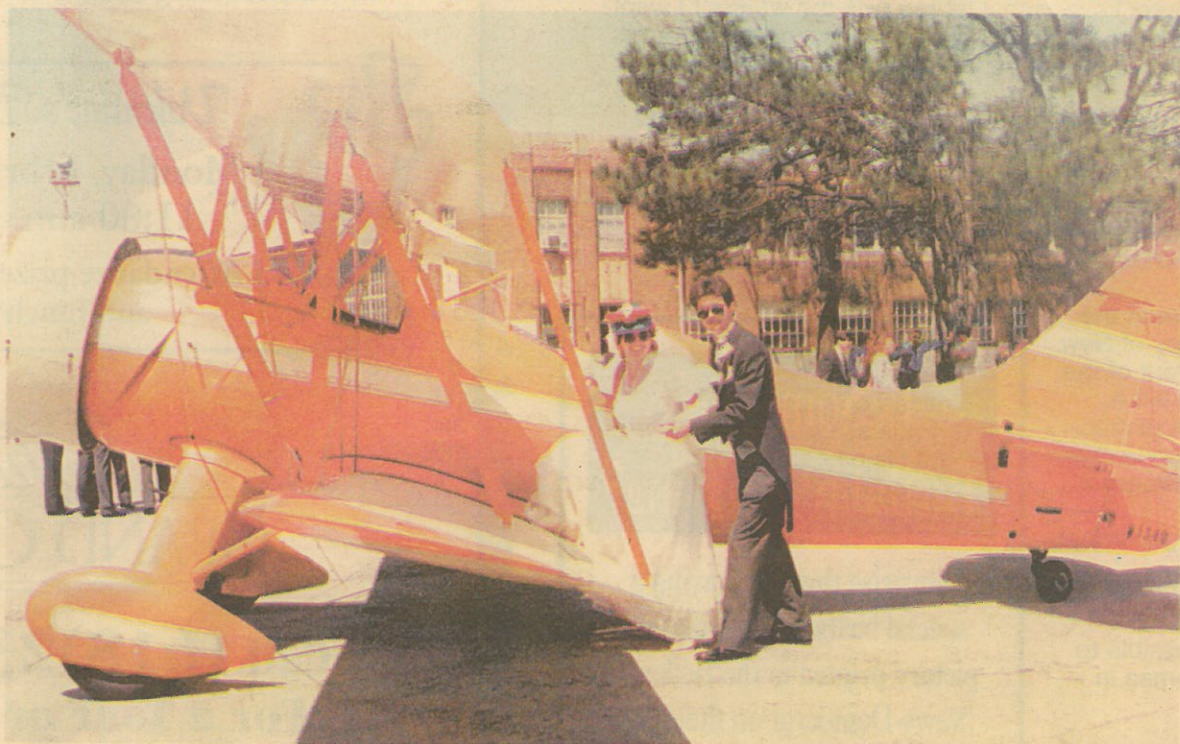
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... WAS DIAGNOSED WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS, DIANE EARHART FOUGHT TO KEEP HER JOB AS AN AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER AT ST. LOUIS DOWNTOWN-PARKS AIRPORT IN CAHOKIA. News-Democrat/Derik Holtmann



... ETARY FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN HAD A DESK JOB BUT HER THOUGHTS WERE IN THE CLOUDS.



MANY WEDDING PARTIES DRIVE AROUND HONKING THEIR HORNS. WHEN DIANE MARRIED TONY JESTIS, THE BRIDAL PARTY FLEW AROUND TO CELEBRATE. A SEQUINED AIRPLANE WITH A 3-FOOT WINGSPAN DECORATED THE TRAIN OF HER WEDDING GOWN.

‘
... my
name is
Earhart
because I
fly
’



News-Democrat/Derik Holtmann

My thing is, 'Dare to dream.' That's one of the drums I bang. You need to have a dream and keep sticking with it.

From Page 7

In 1995, Diane's world turned upside down when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

"It was really strange," she remembered. "I woke up one morning and on the side of my knee, it kind of felt numb. I thought I slept on it wrong. It didn't get better. It was just really weird things. My thigh felt kind of sensitive through the week. If I touched my head, my hair tingled. By Thursday, I had trouble going to the bathroom. ..."

Not wanting to tough out the weekend, she decided to visit the doctor.

"He said, 'It could be a lot of things.' It'll either get better or it'll get worse. It'll have to get worse before we can tell."

Diane's vision began to blur.

"It was like when you have a View-master when you're a kid," she remembered. "You close one eye and you see OK. You close the other eye and you see OK. But together, it's just not right."

"I found out later, some of my symptoms were pretty classic MS

things."

An auto-immune disease with unknown origins, MS occurs when the immune system turns on itself, attacking the nerve linings, known as myelin.

"So you've got these holes in the myelin and kind of an exposed nerve that doesn't conduct the message," she said. "Your brain says, 'Move your hand,' and it doesn't get there."

Off work for three months, Diane fought to regain her strength, while educating herself about the disease.

"Most often, it's relapsing-remitting," she explained, noting her health is much improved since her initial attack. "Some people have relapses every month. Some people go for years."

With medication, many people lead fulfilling and productive lives.

"There are medicines that can keep the relapses in remission for years," said Diane, who still suffers from fatigue and heat intolerance. "I'm appalled that only 18 percent of MS patients are on medication long term. I have people who tell me, 'I'm feeling fine. Why would I take medication?' I say, 'Well, e-mail me from your wheel-

chair in a couple years and tell me how you're doing.'"

After facing her diagnosis, Diane had to face the Federal Aviation Administration.

"Pilots and air traffic controllers have to have a medical certification," she said. "Almost anything can be disqualifying. They found out I had MS and they pulled my medical certification. I spent 10 months fighting to get that back. That was for working — and for flying. I couldn't find a lawyer to take it on, so I did it myself."

Offered forced medical retirement, Diane appealed — and eventually won.

"(The FAA) wanted letters and copies of everything from my doctor and my neurologist. The MRIs, the X-rays. My doctor and my neurologist were so great and so behind me. ..."

"My doctor wrote a letter that said aviation is my life. She said it was more stress not going back to the job I love than having the disease."

When her balance and vision were questioned, Diane sent the FAA film of herself performing various tasks. "I ended up sending them a video of me in my dance class, me riding my bike and me doing two things at once: sorting the laundry while I was telling a story."

"I said, 'Here I am. Tell me why I can't do my job.' I even got a letter from the FAA flight surgeon in Washington saying what a good idea it was to send those videos."

Back working as an air traffic controller since April 1996, Diane must get medically recertified every six months, twice as often as her peers. Easily fatigued, she often uses a cane while running errands and makes sure she gets plenty of sleep — eight to 10

hours a night — in order to keep up her energy.

Still, she doesn't complain. "I kind of blazed the trail for others with MS," said Diane, a certified flight instructor who flies about twice a month. "I know a couple air traffic controllers and a couple pilots with MS. They didn't have as much trouble as I did."

A self-proclaimed cheerleader for the MS Society, Diane is part of a training team for the MS Society's Gateway to Wellness class, a six-week program geared toward teaching MS sufferers about living with the disease. She also talks to school groups and pilots about MS

and started a metro-east support group for people on MS medication. The class meets every other month at St. Elizabeth Medical Arts Building in Belleville.

For her efforts, the air traffic controller recently received a \$7,000 Beta Seron Champions of Courage Grant. The award is bestowed upon MS patients who are taking Beta Seron, getting on with their lives and making a difference.

"It'll be largely used for getting out and spreading the word: There is life after MS," she said. "My thing is, 'Dare to dream.' That's one of the drums I bang. You need to have a dream and keep sticking with it."

The little girl who dared to dream is all grown up — and flying high.

"Having MS is like anything else," she said. "You've got some people who say, 'OK, I'm not going to let this get to me,' and some people who say, 'My life is over.'"

"Life goes on. A lot of good things can still happen — and do."

Support group

For information about the metro-east support group for patients on MS medication, call (800) FIGHT MS.



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