

Female aviators band together

Gazing skyward through her dark-tinted flight glasses, Michaele Serasio, 53, sees more than clouds and sun.

Serasio sees possibilities. She sees adventure in the cockpit of a small plane, and she imagines Earth itself, composed in glorious contours and colors slipping hypnotically by below her.

"Flight is alive. Flight is real life," Serasio said. "That's why I like it.

"You have elements like the wind and other planes that you have to be aware of. Taking off and landing are the hard parts. Once you're in the air, you can enjoy it. It's a good feeling."

A North Salinas High School graduate and registered nurse in case management at Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital, Serasio is also a licensed pilot and a member of one of the most storied groups in aviation history, the Ninety-Nines.

Global in scope, the nonprofit Ninety-Nines has a local group, the Monterey Bay Chapter with 40 members in Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, including Serasio.

The organization, which consists of women in aviation, dates to 1929 when it was founded at Curtiss Field, Valley Stream, Long Island. In 1931, the members elected

pioneering aviator Amelia Earhart as their first president.

The organization is named for the 99 charter members. It now has 6,500 licensed women pilots from 36 countries. Members include corporate pilots, astronaut, student pilots, air traffic controllers, aircraft mechanics, career pilots, certified instructors and pilots, such as Serasio, who buckle into the cockpit for the enjoyment and challenge that moving through space high above Earth's surface can bring.

The Ninety-Nines takes a woman's love of flight and gives it meaning beyond individual experience.

"We do all sorts of things for the community in general," said Donna Crane-Bailey, membership chairwoman.

One example has members going into science and technology classes at every grade level. Members introduce students to flight basics. In October, for example, the

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group has planned a program to bring Girl Scouts to the Salinas Municipal Airport. They'll tour the control tower, visit a facility that restores vintage planes to flying prime and explore other dynamics that make airport life tick.

Over the decades, the Ninety-Nines has included a stellar line-up — first woman to break the sound barrier, first woman airline pilot, first woman U.S. aerobatics champion, first woman captain on a B-747 and the first U.S. military flight demonstration team pilot.

A freedom in the air

Kay Harmon of Salinas, another Ninety-Nines member, started flying at age 41.

Her husband, Ron Harmon, was already an experienced pilot. Kay agreed to learn to fly, too, but reluctantly.

“As a dutiful wife,” she said.

Surprisingly to her, she felt an affinity for flying. Learning the plane's controls proved easy for her. The cockpit environs felt inviting. Kay, with a flight instructor — the plane had dual controls — took off to begin her training. They flew toward Greenfield, doing a few lazy “S” patterns and then tracing circles in the sky.

“Even flying down the Salinas Valley on a beautiful day, there's nothing greater than seeing things like the Salinas River that John Steinbeck wrote about,” Harmon said.

After compiling nine hours of instruction, she soloed. Soon Harmon was an eager pilot. She was driving out to the airport two to three times a week to fly for fun.

“There's such a freedom in flight,” said Kay, who flew with Ron to such places as Lake Tahoe as well as into Utah and Arizona.

Ron died in 2009. Now 79 and no longer flying much, Kay continues her membership with the Ninety-Nines.

Nervous beginnings

Serasio was first intrigued by flight while watching the Navy's blue and gold Blue Angels aerobatics team perform their slicing maneuvers through the sky over the California Airshow Salinas. In the early 1990s, Serasio started flying lessons.

“I was so nervous for my first solo,” she recalled. “I was stuttering. There was no instructor to pull me out if I got in trouble.

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The control tower asked if I was all right, but it all went well.”

For Serasio, flying is a hobby. Every few weeks, she'll rent a plane. Among her flights, one to Santa Rosa in northern California. On that flight, she had to navigate her small plane past the heavy commercial traffic rising out of San Francisco International Airport.

Another flight was along the stunning ruggedness of the Pacific coast.

“I enjoy the challenges of flight and also the camaraderie of the women in the Ninety-Nines,” Serasio said.

In its broader scope, the Ninety-Nines aims to promote world fellowship through flight, as a brochure says. It works to preserve and tell the story of women in flight. It awards scholarships. For the Monterey Bay Chapter, that runs between \$1,000 and \$2,000 yearly, Crane-Bailey said. The money might go, for example, to someone learning to fly or working to achieve a higher pilot ranking.

“Of course, we have a lot of fun, too,” Crane-Bailey said. “Like flying over to the Harris Ranch for lunch.”

(The Harris Ranch, where Interstate 5 meets Highway 198 near Coalinga, features a 2,800-foot landing strip.)

Kay and Ron Harmon loved flying together. They might fly to Southern California on a business trip or to British Columbia to

vacation.

On all their flights, Kay kept in mind what Earhart had said back when she was president of the Ninety-Nines. Earhart offered a nugget of philosophy for the women in the cockpit, advice which has filtered down through time.

“Fly for the fun of it,” Earhart advised.

That's what Kay Harmon did.

On one very enjoyable trip, she and her husband went to Texas to pick up two small planes they intended to sell back home. Together, they flew the planes from Texas back to Salinas. En route, they landed at one airport for the night and at another for a meal.

“Wingtip-to-wingtip,” Harmon said. “It was a great flight.”

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