JAIME TUCKER
PUTTING HER MARK ON IT

FLYING AND THE SINGLE MOM

FINANCIAL CHECK
The Go/No-Go Decision
Jaime Tucker, lead mechanic and aviation maintenance supervisor at Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology (her alma mater and its first female valedictorian), seemed truly surprised to be the subject of this profile. “There are so many great people out there, role models I wish I could meet,” she says. Undoubtedly true, but she herself is an inspiration. In less than a decade she has gone from a woman searching for a career to a maintenance technician one step shy of her professional goal. At the same time, with her husband, James, she is raising a family and contributing to her community outside of aviation. Involved, dedicated, and efficient, for veterans and newcomers alike she exemplifies the drive and dedication necessary to take aviation into the 21st Century.

Her earliest memories are of aviation, she says. “I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t at the airport.” After her parents divorced when she was seven years old, Jaime and her sister Carrie, who’s 10 months older, grew up in Merced, California, in the home of her maternal grandparents. “It was kinda like having two moms and a dad,” she says. Her mother, Alisha, was a junior high school librarian, from where

For a moment she considered flying and fixing, “but once I started learning maintenance, I realized that I enjoyed that a lot more.”
Jaime did a service project that contributed to her Girl Scout Gold Award (think Eagle Scout).

It’s clear that her grandparents, Hank and Beth Manwaring, seriously influenced Jaime. Both pilots, they were deeply involved with local EAA and antique airplane activities and made annual pilgrimages to Oshkosh. A computer programmer, “Grandpa dabbled in real estate—and airplanes,” Jaime says. “They had more airplanes than I can remember. Grandpa would see an airplane that was struggling. Working under an A&P he’d [resuscitate it with] tender loving care and then sell it—unless he became emotionally attached to it.”

Jaime was grandpa’s airport assistant. Preventive maintenance was her usual task, but rigging an airplane was a special event. Being tail-cone compatible, she ran the cables as the mechanic directed, she says, her voice bubbling with excitement at the memory.

Education was important to her parents. “I was expected to get As,” and heard about it if she didn’t. She felt restricted in high school, but time has proven “that they had the right idea,” Jaime says. Between graduation in 1995 and getting married in 1999, Jaime describes her life as “a series of failures.” Struggling to find her way, she followed her sister (now a CPA living in the San Fernando Valley) and studied accounting at the University of the Pacific.

“I just hated it, so I didn’t apply myself,” she says, and dropped out the next year because it “just wasn’t what I wanted to do with my life. I should have realized it was aviation, because it was something I’ve loved my whole life,” but based on her grandparents’s hobby, it didn’t seem to be a viable career.

The pieces of her life started to coalesce when she married James, whom she dated since high school, after his hitch as a Navy nuclear electronics technician. In 2001, working as a community college secretary, one evening she thought, “This is terrible! I don’t want to work at a desk...I just don’t want to float around for the rest of my life! As cheesy as it sounds, I saw a Spartan commercial. That’s when it occurred to me that I could get paid to do aviation!” Initially, James wasn’t sure about moving to Tulsa, Oklahoma, Spartan’s home since its founding in 1928. “It didn’t take long for him to realize I was serious, so he said, ‘Okay, let’s do it!’”

Growing up with stick time with grandpa, and 12 hours of flying lessons after high school, Jaime had fleeting thoughts of becoming a professional pilot. But then she learned about Spartan’s other programs, “A&P, NDT, QC, and all that,” she says, her voice suddenly alive. For a moment she considered flying and fixing, “but once I started learning maintenance, I realized that I enjoyed that a lot more.” Rambling excitedly about the joy and satisfaction her chosen profession provides, she says, “It’s just amazing, all those thousands of parts working together, and it’s a lot of fun being the one who” figures out which one isn’t working as it should.

Jaime started classes on April 2, 2001. On their way to Oshkosh that July, her grandparents perished in an
Iowa soybean field. Facing weather, “they made the decision to move on when they probably shouldn’t have,” she says, somber. At first she questioned her career decision. Refusing to succumb to grief, the accident now anchors her integrity. For a class she dissected the NTSB accident report: “They ran into windshear, and it ripped the V-tail off their V-35 Bonanza.” Maintenance didn’t cause it, but “whenever I sign [a logbook endorsement], I always think of my grandparents. I never want to be the reason someone has to suffer” the tragedy Jaime once endured.

Elected student body president on her way to earning her airframe and powerplant certificate on April 10, 2002, Jaime graduated with an associate of applied science degree in aviation technology management on March 26, 2003. Taking a deep breath, she started her bachelor of applied science degree in aviation technology management on June 9, 2003, and graduated on October 4, 2004. The news that she was Spartan’s first female valedictorian came as a surprise, she says, and they asked her to write a speech.

Student loans and work paid the tuition. “At one point James had four jobs,” one 9-to-5, another on weekends, door-to-door sales, and “his own business doing web design, Tucker Computer Solutions.” After getting her A&P, Jaime worked nights and weekends as a part-timer on the line crew. Two months later Spartan promoted her to detailer/discharger. “It was pretty straight forward,” she says, and “it paid more and it made me full time.” Four months later, on December 29, 2002, Spartan promoted her to the maintenance crew. At first she worked nights and went to class during the day, and did the opposite while working on her bachelor’s degree. She graduated about the time she got her inspection authorization in October 2005. Jaime assumed her current position on September 16, 2008.

A player-coach, she supervises six mechanics who maintain Spartan’s flight training fleet of 47 airplanes, a mixture of Cessna 152s, 172s, 172RGs, Piper Seminoles, and a turboprop Cessna Caravan used for a contract training program for U.S. Air Force pilots and mechanics on their way to Afghanistan.

After two semesters of straight As at the Tulsa campus of Oklahoma State University, Jaime started a family sabbatical from her master’s of science degree in natural and applied science, with an emphasis on aviation and space science. Their twins, Matt and Ben, were born May 3, 2007, followed by Kyle on November 19, 2008. She’ll return to school when the time is right, she says, and a doctorate will follow, because “Grandpa always told us to get the highest education we can get.” Jaime’s ultimate goal “is to be a director of maintenance,” she says, fervently. “I’m one step below that now, but eventually I’d like to get to the top.”

At every step, being at the airport is the best part of her job. “If I was a pilot, I wouldn’t be at the airport. I would be in a seat in an airplane, which is what I didn’t want to do—sit down. When I worked as a secretary, I had this little window, and I would sit at a computer all day. Now I work in this hangar with this huge open door, and I think, ‘That’s got to be the best window in the world.’”

PARTNERING SCHOOLS

Spartan College of Aeronautics and Technology is proud of its relationship with partnering schools around the globe.

The school is a partner in education with the Tulsa Public School system and sponsors Lindbergh Elementary. Partners in Education links students with resources that help provide knowledge and skills needed for future success. The program connects students and teachers with corporate, education, volunteer, government and civic leaders. These partnerships help educators improve the academic and personal growth of their students.

Spartan has also begun a program at Kunjan College in Gunsan, South Korea. The partnership with Kunjan College was established to provide professional pilot training access to students in Asia. Aviation Maintenance, Avionics, Quality Control and Nondestructive Testing programs that are presently available on the U.S. campus in Tulsa, Oklahoma, are expected to be taught in Gunsan on the Kunjan campus soon.

For more information about these partnerships email spartan@mail.spartan.edu.

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