

The Girls With Wings Effect

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"I want you to remember this: You can do ANYTHING you want in life as long as you're willing to break it down into little pieces and work hard at each of them."

I will never forget the looks on the faces of two girls at the end of the table. I had just completed my hour-long demonstration of "everything" pilots need to know in order to complete a flight and brought up my usual "take-home lesson." Since I start out a presentation asking audiences of school age girls if they think they could ever figure out all of this stuff up in the cockpit, I always end with, "recall how at the beginning you said you couldn't?" They always nod. "Well, didn't you do just exactly that? And I want you to remember this: You can do ANYTHING you want in life as long as you're willing to break it down into little pieces and work hard at each of them."

I could tell from the expressions of those two particular girls from this inner-city Cleveland school that they had never heard that message before, and they were especially blown away by it. They looked shocked but determined. If all of the work I have put into *Girls With Wings* over the last ten years achieves nothing more than motivating a small percentage of the thousands of girls to whom I've spoken to aim higher than they would have before hearing the presentation, then I will have achieved my mission of using women in aviation to inspire girls to achieve their full potential.

What I do with the *Girls With Wings* presentation is walk girls through a pretend flight to Florida. [Why Florida? When I ask them where they want to go, someone always says Florida so I have a ready poster of that state hung on the wall as a visual aid.] I show them the aeronautical charts, ask them questions about the lines and symbols. I teach them the phonetic alphabet, and they learn "their" call sign. I tell them about ATC, and have them practice radio calls. I explain the different instruments in the cockpit, and explain how to read them. I top it off with a hands-on pretend flight toward the Florida poster to tie everything together.



I make them get involved with the process and draw in the girls who hang back. Why only girls? If you've ever spoken to a group of girls and boys, you know the boys can dominate the conversation. Especially once the boys find out I've been in the Army, then all they do is ask if I've ever shot anyone.

How did I get to this set, branded presentation? The seed was planted by my being invited to career days to listen to other speakers talk about how they got to where they were in their field. You know the drill: I went to college to study _____. Then I got a job doing _____. Now I spend my days working on _____. I mean, if they couldn't even generate some enthusiasm for what they were doing, how could they hope to inspire it in the kids?

Then, I got an invitation to participate in a NASA Glenn event with the local Girl Scouts. This facility has been working with the Boy Scouts for years and had started scheduling programs with the girls. They had a multitude of hands-on activities: making rockets fly, designing space vehicles, putting on space suits, etc. I sure didn't want to go in there and just

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drone on about my job as a pilot (much as I love it). So I started dreaming up a presentation to SHOW them what I did.

Although the presentation has changed much as I have learned from bringing it to thousands of girls, it has remained basically the same format. When I first showed some adults what I was doing, they all said it was “too hard” for girls. Truth is, it is not. It involves their thought process and a little guidance. And the girls feel such a sense of accomplishment when they get through it themselves. [I actually tell the parents not to “help” since the girls need to go through the sequence of, say, learning to read the instruments. Plus a lot of times, the parents get it wrong, and I have to then correct them.]

Not all girls groups are the same of course. Some girls from different regions, or of different ages, have already become self-conscious and reluctant to participate. It often takes a lot of work just to warm them up. I hate that I have to remind them that there's no penalty for wrong answers. Sometimes I make them scream their names at the top of their voice just to get them to say something. Anything! Some refuse to do even that.

It's amazing to me that here in the year 2011 so many girls still think of different fields as being for men or women. It's sad to see that such a large percentage, while knowing little to nothing about being a pilot, still think that they lack the ability to be one. In a report from the *Congressional Commission on the Advancement of Women and Minorities in Science, Engineering and Technology Development*, although women represent approximately one-third of those employed in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) fields, “media and real-life images of women in science and technical careers are still rare, sending an unspoken message to girls that a SET career is not for them.”

The goal with the *Girls With Wings* presentation is to be the initial introduction to the possibility of being a pilot. I bring the lesson to the girls, whether its where their regular troop meeting is held or the classroom. Although I talk a little bit about how airplanes fly, I don't ever say the word aerodynamics or talk about lift or drag. My objective is to broaden the girls' horizons, increase their knowledge about their available opportunities, inspire confidence, and to have fun. An educator observing the presentation says, “It was a special event for them; motivating and inspiring. Girls probably feel freer to ask questions, be themselves, especially with a topic that's traditionally male.”

The \$5 fee per girl to cover the cost of the presentation includes a take-home bag with, among other things, a synopsis of the presentation and a list of follow-on resources (including the 99s website, of course) as well as a Young Eagles brochure. If I've been successful at lighting a spark towards becoming a pilot and want to continue on this path – I don't want to leave them hanging.

Feedback from teachers, Girl Scout leaders, etc., and the girls is overwhelmingly positive. If you can believe it, the girls want follow-on information and are often actually disappointed they

Lynda Meeks received her initial flight training in the US Army, flying UH-1 “Huey” Helicopters and later the King Air. After leaving the active Army in 1999, she flew for Mesa Airlines, a regional airline operating as US Airways Express and then for Flight Options, a fractional airline.

Presently, she is on furlough from NetJets and working on her CFI, which she hopes will enable her to concurrently work on the ever growing **Girls With Wings** organization. She is an ATP rated pilot with 737, Beechjet, Beech 1900, Citation II, V and X ratings, and has commercial privileges in Single Engine Land and helicopters.

She is a member of the Lake Erie Chapter of the 99s and many other aviation and professional organizations.



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didn't learn *more*. With our presentation, we sow seeds of curiosity. As Asma writes: "Yes, I do want to learn more stuff about how to fly a plane." Emily says, "I must do more research." In the evaluation form we provide to the girls, the first question is *Before you came to visit my class, I didn't know that pilots were ___*. Overwhelmingly, the blank is filled in with "Girls" or "Women," and even "Cool." Because the presentation includes practicing radio calls using the phonetic alphabet Girl Scout Hannah says, "I learned how to talk in 'plane slang.'"

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Girls are also prompted with *My advice to other girls my age after hearing Lynda talk about being a pilot:* and the majority of the girls say, "You can be anything you want to be." Often the "can" and "anything" words are underlined many times. For many of the girls you will speak to, they've received the support of friends, family and other adults, and know they can be anything they want so this just gives them some more options to pursue. For some girls, like the ones who have limited exposure to their opportunities mentioned at the beginning of the article, this is the first time they have really heard and understood this message. Says Sage, "What I thought was most interesting was that we got to try something new."

The girls are asked what they learned from the presentation that they want to share with friends and family, and most write they want to go home and share, "That I met a girl pilot, and she told me what I need to do to so I can be a pilot." Additionally, Tori advises, "listen because she has some great info."

"I thought she was awesome," like Peyton critiqued after a presentation to Mrs. Urbancic's class, especially, says Tia, "when she let us blow up balloons," in reference to that last hands-on activity. The last statement on the form is *When I grow up I still want to be a ___, but I may fly airplanes just for fun!* There are quite a few careers written here, but a truly telling and insightful response from 5th grader Amanda, "don't stick with one 'life goal.'"

In addition to the presentation, *Girls With Wings* also has an interactive website with coloring pages and games, plus "Role Model" pages with the bios of 87 women in different fields of aviation (No, we're not just about being pilots!). Each page talks about what the women do, like engineering or maintenance, how they got there and why they love it. Additionally, we offer annual scholarships for flying lessons.

One of our major efforts features our mascot, Penelope Pilot. She has her own website, www.PenelopePilotProject.org, which has a calendar of aviation events, and her own full color children's picture book, *Penelope Pilot and her First Day as Captain*. Our online Pilot Shop features t-shirts with slogans such as "Yes, Girls Can Fly!" and "It's not how tall you are, it's how high you fly!" to help spread our positive message.

We are an all volunteer organization that relies on the active involvement of many people to make dreams take flight. *Girls With Wings, Inc.*, is classified as an educational public charity under IRS code 501(c)(3) regarding tax-exempt organizations. As such we receive our funding from donations, sponsorships, and grants.

We need your time, effort and financial assistance. To learn more about the organization and volunteer opportunities, please visit www.GirlsWithWings.com.

