



From Cli

By Lisa A. Wright

Paula Vogel is smart, ambitious and happy. She also has a passion for sharp hairdos, and on first impression the 32-year-old woman might seem an ideal hairdresser. But at least one person has always known that doing other people's hair wouldn't be a perfect career for her. That person was Paula Vogel.

Born in Michigan, Vogel has lived most of her life in Manatee County, FL, home to more than 300,000 residents and covering a span of 893 square miles. After high school, she became a hairdresser. But today, she hardly has time to care for her own locks. She's now the director of maintenance for the Manatee County Sheriff's Office Aviation Unit.



To make the move from salon stylist to maintenance professional, Vogel began by enlisting in the U.S. Army.

"I had to make my own opportunities. No one in my family had ever served in the military, and they were very surprised when I signed up," she said. "I wanted a challenge, and I certainly found it." Vogel qualified to become either a boat or helicopter mechanic, and she decided on aviation. During her Army career, she became a Blackhawk crew chief and also acquired training as an emergency medical technician.

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THE MANATEE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE DIRECTOR OF MAINTENANCE DIDN'T LET EXPECTATIONS KEEP HER FROM PURSUING HER DREAMS.

After the Army, Vogel went to school to earn her A&P license and began working in general aviation. That was the first time she heard negative comments about being a woman mechanic.

"I was working on repairing an airplane, and the customer told my boss he couldn't believe there was a woman working on his plane," Vogel said. "The supervisor explained to the client that I was well-qualified to do the work. I wasn't insulted at all, but I kind of laughed about it."

Vogel was able to get experience in sheet metal repairs, re-fabrications, avionics, instrument panels and camera mounting, among other tasks. "If you're an A&P, some like either engine or structural work, but they don't especially like electrical or avionics repairs. I enjoy both," Vogel said.

She furthered her knowledge by taking training classes and earning her Inspection Authorization certification. During that training, Vogel was usually one of the few women attending.

Through her father-in-law, Vogel then met a lieutenant with the Manatee County Sheriff's Office who was in charge of the Selective Enforcement Division, which included aviation. He later offered her a part-time, temporary work assignment on an avionics project. She excelled at the job. A few months later, her supervisor accepted a position with the Federal Aviation Administration, and the position of director of maintenance became available. Vogel accepted the role in 2004.

Although not a sworn officer, Vogel now manages a fleet of two helicopters (one EC120 and one OH58) and one fixed-wing aircraft (a Cessna 172). The aviation unit's staff includes two pilots, two observers, one sergeant, one lieutenant and Vogel—the sole mechanic. In addition, she is responsible for inventory control and budgeting. That's a lot of work for one person, but Vogel takes pride in managing her time.

"There is no hurrying when it comes to working on the aircraft, that's when mistakes happen. If I have questions, I'm



going to ask. I'm not going to wing it," she explained.

On top of her professional duties, Vogel is married with two small children, the youngest coming along since being at the sheriff's office.

"You should have seen me while I was pregnant under the instrument panel with a big belly, wiring up everything," she said. "My kids know what I do, and it's not a big deal at home. When they see a helicopter in the air, however, they ask, 'is that yours, mommy?'"

Vogel believes that gender is not an issue. "I do my job, and I do it well. Some women let negative comments from men bother them, and that's wrong," she said. "It's true in any occupation, and I think your mentality makes a difference in being 'accepted.' You have to consider the source when you hear a negative comment. Also, more men are [becoming agreeable] to working together, and I think that will encourage future women to be more involved in aviation careers." ▼

Be A 'Jet Ahead' Mentor

Jet Ahead: Women Mentoring Women, a new program developed for female A&P students around the country, today offers females with a love for aviation a clearer path to becoming an A&P than the one followed by Paula Vogel.

When Raylene Alexander left the airline industry and started a career teaching aviation maintenance, she noticed most female students lacked an understanding of how they would fit in their chosen career. Jet Ahead therefore was established to bring the students together with a mentor who has been out in the field and can answer questions and help alleviate concerns.

Jet Ahead is a program designed to be flexible in meeting the needs of A&P schools, as well as their students. It is the program's hope to reduce the dropout rate of female A&P students, as well as to help schools reach out to more women.

The program was in development for two years before the pilot program began in January 2007. It has already been instrumental in helping one student avoid dropping out and rediscover her love for aviation. Jet Ahead also is designed to assist students in their networking and career development skills.

It is important that the program remains fluid and doesn't become stagnant. Because it is a volunteer program, Jet Ahead continues to recruit women A&Ps to become mentors. If you have worked in the maintenance field, whether you are currently a mechanic or not, Jet Ahead could use your help.

If you are interested in becoming a mentor and would like more information, please visit www.salina.k-state.edu/aviation/jetahead/ or contact Raylene Alexander, assistant professor at Kansas State University, by phone at (785) 826-2940 or email at raylene@sal.ksu.edu.