

# Desert Bloom

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
DENISE WILSON, CAM, PRESIDENT  
AND CHIEF PILOT, DESERT JET

*Denise Wilson is the founder, President and Chief Pilot of Desert Jet, an aircraft charter and management company based in the Palm Springs area of California. She manages a fleet of three turbine aircraft and provides turbine transition, initial operating experience and standardization training for pilots new to aircraft type. She is accredited as a Certified Aviation Manager by the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA). She has over 6,000 hours of flight experience and six type ratings.*

## **How did you begin your career?**

I began flying as a hobby. At the time I started flight lessons, I was a musician and had a full time job as a band and orchestra director for a private school, grades 5-12. I was working very long days and thought flying might be a nice diversion. My initial instructor was very low key and a great teacher. I quickly became hooked on flying, to the point that I was always looking up to the sky when I heard an airplane fly overhead, wishing I was flying.

I so enjoyed training that I was soon flying at every opportunity. I earned my private pilot's certificate in three months then started right in on training for my instrument rating, then commercial certificate. I found I truly enjoyed training as it gave me a mission and an excuse to go flying. I just continued training and before I knew it I became a CFI. At the end of my CFI ride, my examiner, who had given me most of my check rides, asked me, "When are you going to stop training and just become a pilot?" That began the epiphany of my career change.

The examiner had arranged a part

time flight instruction position for me, so I started teaching in the evenings after work and on weekends. I snuck

## **Interview by Cassandra Bosco**

in my commercial multi and then MEI—all in a span of a few months while continuing to work full time as a music teacher. When the end of the school year came I resigned and made the leap to being a full time flight instructor.

I flew so much that first summer that I kept bumping up against flight time limits. At the end of the summer I interviewed with American Eagle Airlines and was hired to fly the Saab 340.

As a pilot working through my ratings, my mentors were all flight instructors who had the same goal—to be hired by an airline. That's all I knew at the time, that CFIs aspired to become regional airline pilots. I didn't know anyone who flew a King Air or a Citation. In fact, I had never even seen the inside of a Citation until I was hired for my first jet job. So, I did what all my instructors and fellow CFIs did—I went to a regional airline to build time to become competitive for a major airline job. It wasn't until being furloughed after 9/11 did I have the wonderful opportunity to experience corporate aviation and fly my first jet, a Cessna Citationjet, and to learn from one of the best. That first job led to many opportunities in corporate aviation that just wouldn't have been possible if that first Chief Pilot hadn't given me a chance.

I want to thank Women in Aviation for providing so many wonderful scholarship opportunities. I was the recipient of the American Airlines type rating scholarship 10 years ago which helped



open several doors for me along my career path.

In 2002, I attended the Women in Aviation Conference in Nashville where I met a group of wonderful gals that I'll never forget. One of them gave me a recommendation for employment at Aloha Airlines. I didn't hear from Aloha for several years, during which time I was happily flying a Citationjet. Out of the blue one day I was offered an interview. When I was offered the position I almost turned it down, but then thought, "When am I ever again going to have the opportunity to fly a 737-200 around the Hawaiian Islands?" I accepted the position and worked for Aloha until they filed their first bankruptcy.



Even though it was a huge detour to my current position, it was just one of those fun opportunities you can't pass up.

### **When/how did you become interested in aviation?**

My mom worked for a subcontractor for Boeing on the P-3 Orion sonobuoy receiver program. She took me along on one of her business trips to Seattle, where she took me to the Museum of Flight—the first time I had ever seen an airplane that wasn't an airliner. I was maybe 12 years old.

After that I was always fascinated by airplanes, but I was never exposed to opportunities to really learn about or explore them. On my 18th birthday, as I was

driving home from school, I passed the same "Learn to Fly" sign that I had driven by for years, wondering what it would be like to fly. I stopped at the flight school at Cable Airport in Upland and asked for a ride in an airplane. That's just what I got—a nice little ride where I was never offered the controls and told not to touch anything. I'm convinced that if I had been assigned a different instructor that day I would have started my career in aviation ten years earlier.

### **What made you start a charter company?**

I had flown for several charter companies in the past, and I loved the work—not just the flying, but the personal in-

teraction with passengers, the variety of the trips, and never really knowing where you'll be going and for how long. But early in my flying career there were sometimes occasions where I didn't agree with decisions made by others that affected the safety of my flights—especially the ones involving stretching the regs just a bit, or turning an eye on maintenance issues. After finding a company that I felt did things the right way, I soon became involved in safety committee projects and eventually was appointed Director of Safety, then Chief Pilot. It was rewarding work as I felt like I was making a difference.

A turn in my career came when my very good friend Mani arranged a posi-

tion for me, managing a Part 91 flight department with one Citation, which I was to acquire. It was true freedom, being able to establish and run my own flight department. I discovered a whole new sector of aviation and thrived as an aircraft manager. Soon after, several of the Part 91 flight departments in our area gathered together to start a cooperative, in order to negotiate fleet discounts on fuel, training, insurance and maintenance. The cooperative developed into an aircraft management company soon after. It was just the natural next step to apply for Part 135 certification and begin service in our region. We now have three aircraft in our fleet with plans for more growth due to demand.



**My advice would be to nurture all of your relationships, both personal or professional, and make the effort to help others in their job search as much as possible. One day the person you had helped will come back to help you in return.**

***How is the economy affecting the business jet business?***

There have been numerous people that lost their short-lived fortunes and can no longer afford to operate or even own their aircraft. This, coupled with the perceived public perception of the business jet as a wasteful use of company resources, has led to an unprecedented parking of the nation's corporate jet fleet. This has caused the values of every corporate jet to plummet, manufac-

turer orders to disappear, and has affected thousands of aviation support businesses such as FBOs and refurbishment/completion centers, not to mention pilots.

People still need to fly and get business done—that hasn't changed—but we have recently been in a period where many are travelling less and trying to fit more into a single trip. I've also noticed a shift in activity of those that own their own aircraft. Some might be adding partners, downsizing to a smaller aircraft, or just being more cautious about the trips flown due to a perceived view of aircraft usage. For us as a charter company, we saw a huge increase, about nine months ago, of business from clients who previously owned a fractional share or their own aircraft but have downsized or decreased their flying. In the past few weeks, however, we've had two of our clients approach us about acquiring an aircraft for them and then chartering it for them. That is a positive sign that people believe the used aircraft market has hit bottom, and they are ready to get back in and find some bargains.

***What do you think about the recent negative publicity and misperceptions of business aviation?***

I think it is unfortunate that our entire industry was irreparably damaged by the actions of a few. I wish we had, as a community, been more proactive about communicating the good our industry does so we could be prepared for an attack like this. For years, our industry has quietly supported Corporate Angel Network, Angel Flight, humanitarian relief efforts, Veteran's Airlifts—all sorts of worthwhile organizations. Now we need to outwardly show the value smaller airports give to their communities, the value in companies being able to use their aircraft as a tool to give them a competitive edge, and the importance of supporting aircraft manufacturers that provide us with thousands of jobs.

I now try to be very vocal about volunteerism that occurs in corporate aviation and the benefits that aviation provides to the community. I've learned it is the responsibility of every one of us, not just our industry groups, to advocate the benefits of aviation.



### **What do you love most about your career?**

What I love the most about being in aviation is that there is constant change and variety. We travel to different destinations daily and have the opportunity to meet new people. As pilots, we have the opportunity to trigger newness in our daily grind by moving to a new airframe, changing seats, or becoming involved in other aspects of managing the flight department.

What I love the most about my company is our team. Our pilots and support staff are the most dedicated professional and talented people I've ever worked with. It's very rewarding for us to finally see our vision come to fruition.

### **What advice do you have for others interested in a career in aviation?**

There are many facets to the aviation industry that will provide a rewarding career. Take a good look at careers in the corporate and private sector. Be prepared for a bumpy road no matter which path you take, and perhaps a long period of time for "paying your dues", but if you love aviation it will be worth the sacrifices.

Networking is so very important in aviation. Many of the opportunities I've received over the years are due to picking up leads and recommendations from co-workers and acquaintances. My advice would be to nurture all of your relationships, both personal or professional, and make the effort to help others in their job search as much as possible. One day the person you had helped will come back to help you in return. Attend events such as the Women in Aviation and NBAA conferences to meet more people and learn more about potential career paths.

Social networking is hugely important as well. I know more pilots that I have met online than I have met in person, just because there are so few pilots in our community. One of the best career opportunities ever offered to me was from a flight department manager who read my postings on an internet message board.

Always be looking for the next best opportunity. If you are a co-pilot, you should be preparing to upgrade. If you are a captain, look at ways to expand your role as a safety officer or chief pilot. If you are a flight department manager, become a Certified Aviation Manager (CAM) and/or pursue an MBA. Explore every opportunity that is offered, even if at first glance it seems to not fit with your goals. You never know where an opportunity might take you.

Apply for every scholarship offered, even if you think you aren't competitive. Apply for every job that interests you, even if they aren't hiring. Your name will get out and that might lead to other opportunities you hadn't even considered.

Be enthusiastic, positive and focused on your goals. Don't let a period of bad luck or unemployment bring you down as negativity affects your ability to see a hidden opportunity. ➔

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*Cassandra Bosco is President at TailWinds Communications and handles Public Relations for several large organizations.*

## **DESERT JET – BEING INVOLVED**

*"We are all like one-winged angels. It is only when we help each other that we can fly."*

*-- Luciano de Crescenzo*

### **Your company is very involved in community service work. What is the motivation?**

When I was young, my eight-year-old brother was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. During that time, our family was helped by several volunteer organizations such as the Ronald McDonald House, Camp Good Times and the Make a Wish Foundation. That meant a lot to me personally, as there were so many individual people in these organizations that made a huge impact on my brother's state of mind during his recovery.

When I began flight training, I heard about Angel Flight West and thought it was a perfect fit—a way to build my experience and use my developing skills as a pilot to help someone else in need, as my brother was when he was ill. It was very rewarding and one of the most fulfilling experiences I had during my flight training.

My involvement with the Young Eagles grew from sharing my love of flying with my music students. I'd take my students flying after school out of Van Nuys airport and fly them over our school and their homes. Of course I encouraged them to take the controls and try their hand at flying, hoping to recruit more future pilots or at the least, advocates of general aviation.

We also are involved with three wonderful organizations: Lucky Star Cavalier Rescue, Citation Special Olympics Airlift and Angel Flight West. One of our recent missions included providing transportation for six puppies rescued by Lucky Star Cavalier Rescue, a non-profit charitable organization, from a Missouri puppy mill to their new foster and forever homes in California.



In addition, we participate in the Citation Special Olympics Airlift where companies fly Special Olympics participants to the national games. Often it their first time in an aircraft and they are very excited about the upcoming games and their flight.

Another recent mission involved flying children and counselors home from Camp Laurel, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of children, youth and families living with HIV and AIDS. This mission was coordinated through Angel Flight West.

**MEET WAI AT SUN 'N' FUN'S APRIL FLY-IN**

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***Flo Newton:  
Rising to the  
Top at Global  
Aviation***

**DESERT JET  
DENISE WILSON  
MAKING BUSINESS  
AVIATION BLOOM**

**It's Tax Time  
Are you  
READY?**