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Local Aviatrix and Author Discusses Life in the Sky

By Bobbie Dodson



MJ Marggraff at a recent Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary meeting. Photo provided

presentation, "To the Edge: The Next New Astronaut" with those attending the Three-Quarter Century Club luncheon in Orinda, and the Lamorinda Sunrise Rotary breakfast meeting where her husband is a member.

Early on women weren't chosen for the astronaut program so Marggraff trained to be a pilot, commercial pilot and an instructor. "I persevered and carved my place in the sky even though feeling out of place most of the time in the mainly male world of aviation. I was tested in more ways than just by flying exams," she says with a wry smile.

When she began this adventure some of her acquaintances thought she was crazy or maybe had a mid-life death wish but her group of close friends, the "Chicks in Charge" encouraged her and also began their own search for more stimulating lives. "I treasure their friendship and their attitude. "We never said 'That's too hard, or too dangerous, you can't do it,'" Marggraff remarks.

The next big step was to train at the NASTAR Center outside of Philadelphia in the Phoenix Centrifuge where one can "fly" to 16,000 feet at a perceived speed of 25,000 miles per hour seated in a gondola at the end of a 25-foot arm. Marggraff says, as she took up to 6Gs momentarily, "Your face can look 10 to 20 years older as it strains against the G forces. There's heavy pressure and we're told we should push our breath and squeeze our muscles. Another mother in the class quipped, 'We shouldn't have any trouble, it sounds just like child birth.'"

Author of "100 Things to Make a Difference," Marggraff has completed a second book, "Time for a Lift" due to be released in December. It's based on true events when she reconnected with her dream of learning to fly at a time her family included children, 8 and 10, and she was in her 40s. While she doesn't expect all her readers will take up flying, the message is "finding your passion in life is a necessity."

"It's not without hard work and humility, but there will be a personal transformation that will be yours forever," she explains.

A volunteer at the Space Station Museum in Novato, this trim, blonde woman with a ready smile transmits her enthusiasm for space to young students and the importance of STEM, (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) to prepare them for all the challenges new technology brings.

"The museum inspires all with its real and touchable space artifacts, space suits, and parts of

MJ Marggraff says learning to fly and becoming an astronaut was a childhood dream. "Funny thing about dreams, they never really go away. Now I will one day be part of a mission into sub-orbital space. My finest dream yet."

Marggraff is a Mission Support Representative for Virgin Galactic's South Bay Space Agency. She is on the list for a trip into suborbital space on which, she explains, she will take along research that will help others here on Earth. It's with Virgin Galactic, the world's first commercial spaceflight company. The flight, which costs \$250,000, will take two hours and accommodate six passengers and two pilots. The space adventurers will experience six minutes of weightlessness when they can release their seatbelts and float around the cabin.

It's been quite a journey to get to this point which the Lafayette resident recently shared in her

spacecrafts. I do hands-on experiments related to astronomy such as how eclipses work and what makes a prism. Others there include former NASA employees and local astronauts who drop in to visit. I think I'm the only aviatrix and, not surprisingly, I encourage learning to fly, especially to girls. Only 8 percent of pilots are women."

Space Fest, which includes lots of booths and rides in a lunar rover, will be held Aug. 2 at the museum. The Space Station Museum is located in Pacheco Plaza, 464 Ignacio Blvd. in Novato. The hours are Thursdays and Fridays: 11 am to 3 pm.; Saturdays and Sundays: noon to 4 p.m. For information about a presentation on "The Edge" to your group, email Marggraff at mjmarggraff@gmail.com.

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