ONE FLIGHT ATTENDANT ON 5 DECADES OF FLYING

News / Personalities

Carol Andrews, a United Airlines flight attendant for 52 years with more than 10 million miles under her belt, was showing no signs of slowing down on a recent afternoon as she addressed a lady's group while dressed in her 1960s United uniform.

While the Pinewood Springs resident persisted in offering to show some magic tricks to the century-old Country Club, the lady's group that meets at the First Lutheran Church in Longmont, it was the stories covering her career that held the room.

"I was reading that the rings of Saturn are made of the lost luggage from the airlines," Andrews, 74, said with a smile.

She was 22 years old in 1963 when she went to the Washington National Airport to talk to the different airlines seeking work. She was finally offered a job with United because her hair color was the same as the recruiter's wife. However dated and ludicrous that might seem now, it led to a lengthy and storied career.

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“A week after graduation, I headed off to Chicago for training school,” Andrews said. “I had never flown before, but my hair was the right color. They gave me a standby ticket to depart from Baltimore, then called Friendship, airport. I got on the jump-seat and didn’t know what to expect. I had six weeks of training in Chicago, and it was all about heels, hose and girdles. It was kind of a charm school, though you had to learn about aircraft too.”

Speaking to the Times-Call in 2013 as she celebrated her 50th anniversary in the air, Andrews reminisced about the days when flying was something that people dressed up for and looked forward to. “Flying used to be a white-glove service,” she said. “It was luxurious and people got dressed up, but the attire nowadays is comfortable.”

A year later, the Times-Call spoke to Andrews again after she had turned down a $100,000 buyout. “I’m just not ready to go,” she said at the time. “I like the variety, the people, and I look forward to going to work every day.”

Andrews remembered that she chose to work out of Denver because somebody had told her that there were seven men to every one woman in the region, and she got teary as she recalled first emerging from a plane and seeing the mountains, snow and blue sky.

Her memories of her first flight were less fond, as it took her back to Baltimore. Her first trip west, to San Francisco, was a little more glamorous despite being in the middle of the night. During her many Californian flights in what she called the “good old days,” she rubbed shoulders with the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Marlon Brando. “It was an interesting time,” she said.

Another anachronism: She had to resign because she was married. “I hid the marriage for as long as I could, and then my uniform started getting a little bit too tight because I was carrying my son David,” she said. “You could resign, quit or be fired, and I wanted to leave the door open in case I wanted to work there again. I resigned, and there was a class-action case that stayed in the courts for 15 years before they decided that it was discrimination … It was good for me because I could raise my boys.”

Even during those 15 years, Andrews fed her flying bug by working on corporate flights until she was eventually hired back.

Andrews concluded by saying that, over the past 52 years, much has changed and much is the same. “People are the same,” she said. “They want to be acknowledged, they want to be respected, and they want to get from A to B on time — the same as 50 years ago.”

04 JANUARY 2016

SOURCE: SKIFT
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