

American's first female pilot inspires new award that honors women in filmmaking

3/3/2017

As the preferred airline in Hollywood since the 1930s, American Airlines partners with many great organizations throughout Los Angeles, New York and the entertainment industry, one of them being Film Independent. In February, American announced a new award in partnership with the Film Independent Spirit Awards. The Bonnie Award — which will be presented for the first time in 2018 — is named after Bonnie Tiburzi Caputo, the first woman to fly for a major U.S. carrier when she was hired by American in 1973. It will be presented along with a \$50,000 grant to an up-and-coming female film director and seeks to honor her innovative vision and breakthrough work in the entertainment industry. We recently caught up with Bonnie to talk about her career and the new award.

Bonnie's winners

Q. Aisle or window?

A. Definitely the window. I am in awe of the view and still take photos of the skylines and the wings.

Q. What is your favorite aircraft type?

A. I love Boeing. My favorite is the B757; it's like a sports car. It can go anywhere and do anything you want it to do. The B767 was more like a Cadillac — more comfortable. The B727 was the workhorse and was so predictable. They all have their own personalities, but I'm definitely a Boeing person

Q. How would you describe your experience when you joined American in 1973?

A. American was so welcoming to me. There were over 200 people that were hired that year and all of them were men except for me. There were some individuals who didn't want me there, but American as a whole went out of its way to make me feel like an equal part of the team.

At that time, crew lounges were separated – one for male crew members, the other for female flight attendants. On my first flight, I didn't know exactly which crew lounge I was supposed to go into. But as I got closer, I saw that some of the pilots put a sign outside the male crew lounge that said, "and Bonnie, too." That was the moment I knew I was accepted.

Q. Did you encounter any resistance when preparing to become a pilot?

A. When I began looking for jobs, I applied to every single airline, and I received rejection letters from all of them, except American. American sent me a handwritten letter saying that they couldn't hire me at the time because they had pilots on furlough, but to please keep them updated on my progress. And so I did. Every month, I sent a letter with my flight time and what aircraft I had been flying. I always received an encouraging letter back. When the time was right, they hired me.

Q. How do you think about your legacy in the aviation industry?

A. For me, this industry is my life. I grew up wanting to be a pilot because my dad was a pilot, my brother became a pilot and my grandfather owned a manufacturing company that made airplane parts. Aviation consumed me.

Women had been around since the beginning of aviation, but I think the important part was that when I was hired, it was the first time female pilots were paid the same as their male counterparts in the aviation industry. That's significant. The industry is making progress, and I believe it will continue to make progress.

Q. You are the namesake of The Bonnie Award. How does that feel?

A. I'm extremely proud that American remembers me and that I can still play a role in aviation. It's heartwarming, really. Women have grown up knowing that if they want to get involved in a male-dominated field, they have to try harder, work harder and be better, just to be equal. The idea that we're rewarding women who have persevered in the pursuit of their dreams is exciting. And to have my name on this award is an honor.

For more information on the Bonnie Award, please visit TheBonnieAward.com.