

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

» Getting to Know
COPA Pilots



Laurie Einstein Koszuta has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now owns a Cirrus SR22. With John as the pilot-in-command and Laurie as the partner, they regularly travel to see family, visit friends and enjoy our beautiful country. You can read more of Laurie's work on her website: www.laurieeinsteinkoszuta.com.



Helena D'Angelo with The Pink Panther - her SR22 G7.

The Courage to Climb How one woman took on aviation – and herself – with unexpected results.

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

Helena D'Angelo likes to say she's "a very unlikely pilot."

"I'm not particularly mechanically minded. I don't think like an engineer," she said. Growing up, her brother was the one dismantling VCRs, motorcycles and even the reptile cage in his room. "I just walked by and played with my Barbies."



Helena built a life as a writer and full-time mom of two girls. She earned a master's in journalism, worked as a newspaper reporter in the Boston area and later became a college-essay coach, helping high school students tell their stories for applications.

Becoming a pilot, though? That felt far-fetched.

When she was newly divorced and short on free time, she discovered charter flying as a practical way to travel. Using a Cirrus charter company out of Bedford, Massachusetts, she found she could fly to places like Martha's Vineyard, the Hamptons and Stowe, Vermont, in just over an hour.

"In a car, it would take six hours," she says. "I had limited time away from my kids and a big appetite for life."

You Should Learn to Fly

On one of those flights to Martha's Vineyard, her charter pilot, Steve Bennett, changed everything.

"It was the most thrilling thing I had ever done. We laughed the whole way," she noted. When they landed, Steve turned to her and said, "You had such a great time. You've got to learn to fly."

Her answer was immediate: "Absolutely not, way too many buttons. I'm not cut out for this. You've got the wrong girl."

Steve was gentle but persistent, "You love this. You should do this. You're smart." It took six years for that message to sink in. The turning point came when both daughters left home, one for college and the other for boarding school.

"All of a sudden, I had all this free time," she said. "I'd done everything I wanted to do on the ground. I wanted to do something really difficult to inspire myself."

On the very afternoon she dropped her older daughter at college, she drove straight to the airport for a discovery flight. "I cried for about two hours after that," she admitted. "For decades, I had poured myself into my family, my kids and important causes. I knew I had to move on and prioritize myself first, for the first time since my children were born."

Trusting a 23-Year-Old

The discovery flight was on a perfect summer day. "The pilot made it look easy," Helena said. "I now know it's not easy, but it felt magical and I knew it was something I wanted to do."

Her training took place at Mike Goulian Aviation at Hanscom Field (KBED), a Cirrus training center near her home in Bedford. When the office manager called to tell her who her instructor would be, he told Helena to look the young woman up online.

"I did that and she looked about 12," Helena joked. "She was baby-faced and rosy-cheeked. She was 23; I was 46. I remember thinking, 'Am I really entrusting my life to this child in an airplane?'"

That "child" turned out to be a highly qualified Cirrus Standardized Instructor Pilot (CSIP) who'd trained at the University of North Dakota and attended the EAA Air Academy at 16. Shelby Lillie became Helena's primary instructor and convinced Helena she could actually fly.



◀ Helena flying with Chris Eichman.

“It’s actually pretty romantic,” she said. After a long-distance relationship, she moved from Boston to Lake Oswego, Oregon, to be closer to him and his younger children. They now share a life, two airplanes and more than a few adventures in the air.

“He sold that first plane for me. Then I bought ‘The Pink Panther.’”

A Pink Tribute

Helena’s gratitude for that crowd of instructors ended up literally painted on her airplane.

At Oshkosh, she noticed the military aircraft with pilots’ names and crew stenciled on the fuselage. “I thought, I haven’t accomplished this on my own. There’s no way I could have done this without my team,” she stated.

So, she created her own homage. On the left side of her Cirrus, hot-pink stars hold the names of all her female instructors. On the right side, blue stars hold the names of her male instructors. “I wanted to honor the beautiful community that believed in me,” she said.

Her first airplane was a normally aspirated 2019 SR22 G6, purchased before she earned her certificate. “I wanted to practice on my own equipment,” she said.

Eventually, she ordered a brand-new SR22T G7 through the Xi program. Given complete creative freedom, Helena learned she could make the plane look the way she wanted. “They said, any color, any symbols, interior, exterior – whatever you want, we’ll make it happen.”

The Long Road to Private

From that day in 2021, it took her about two and a half years to earn her private pilot certificate.

“I didn’t have any aviators in my life before starting training,” Helena said. “I didn’t know anything about aviation nor did I understand that you need to fly regularly for any of the lessons to stick, so it was very slow going at first. I took the first two winters off and then came back. Not flying consistently meant I would take one step forward and two steps back. Along the way, I had several other instructors who would fill in for my primary instructor when she was not available.”

In total, Helena worked with 12 instructors, spending about 70% of her time with Shelby, her initial instructor.

“Each instructor taught me something pivotal,” she said. “I can tell you exactly what I learned from every single one. Shelby taught me nearly everything I know about flying, but sometimes it took hearing that same lesson from another instructor for it to sink in.”

Love at Oshkosh

Learning to fly even extended into her personal life. She laughs when she talks about how she met her boyfriend, Chris Eichman.

When she was shopping for her first aircraft, Helena had contacted Aerista, the world’s most prominent brokerage firm for owner-flown airplanes. At the time, she’d been working with one of Aerista’s sales specialists over the phone. Months later, during Oshkosh, she walked up to the Aerista booth to introduce herself and Chris was there.

“I’d done everything I wanted to do on the ground. I wanted to do something really difficult to inspire myself.”

The result is The Pink Panther, a turbocharged G7 with hearts, stars and that trail of instructor names. She took delivery on her 49th birthday in Knoxville.

And at first? She hated it.

“I had just passed my instrument check ride in my G6 two days earlier. I was so intimately acquainted with those avionics,” she said. “Switching to the new touchscreen system felt awful. The first two days, I just sat on the hot bench and cried.”

Her factory instructor, Cirrus training legend Ed Watters, patiently walked her through the transition.

“He explained things in really simple terms I could relate to,” she said. “I went from thinking, can I get my old airplane back and just paint it pink, to absolutely loving the G7. Now I go back and forth between them easily, and the G7 is absolutely the way to go. It’s brilliantly designed.”

Eight Weeks to Instrument

As mentioned, Helena went on to get her instrument rating and completed it in about eight weeks, working with a female CFI she met in the Pacific Northwest. The instructor came to Boston, and they flew together six or seven days a week, finishing the rating in roughly five weeks of actual flying.

She’s now the owner of not only The Pink Panther, but also an ICON A5,

which she keeps in Aurora, Oregon. “It’s an amphibious light sport with a parachute built into the airframe,” she explained. She can legally fly it runway-to-runway without a seaplane rating, but she’s currently working on getting that rating as well.

Her next goals are to obtain her commercial, CFI and CFI – not necessarily to teach, but to keep challenging herself and deepen her mastery.

Thirty Miles of Open Water

One flight in particular tested everything Helena had learned. Last July, she and Chris flew his SR22T G5 to a remote part of British Columbia. “We said, ‘OK, 1,000 MSL for five minutes, then we climb,’ because we both knew it’s not a great idea to cruise low over the open ocean,” she explained. They were wearing personal flotation devices (PFDs) under their seatbelts, as recommended for over-water flight.

As they began their climb, there was a loud bang. The engine would only produce partial power.

“Chris was flying, and I was on radios and navigation,” Helena remembered. “I flipped to the engine page and saw we were not making power on cylinder five.” They were still over open water, now about 5,000 feet MSL with 30 nautical miles between them and their destination on Vancouver Island – an island with the highest population



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« **Helena at Oshkosh** with Shelby Lillie and Prassuna Budlong (both Mike Goulian Aviation CSIPs) who taught her to fly.

of grizzly bears and cougars in North America. “We knew we would survive a complete power loss in a Cirrus by following emergency procedures and pulling CAPS, but we weren’t as sure we would survive the threats to our lives in that wilderness.”

Thirty miles to the south was a small, nontowered strip in the United States, across the international border but still over stretches of ocean. Ahead lay their planned destination. To the east, a rugged coastline dotted with occasional beaches was a place where they could potentially land or pull the chute with at least a chance of rescue.

They chose the coastline and worked together as a crew, precisely as they’d briefed.

“Every time we fly, we discuss our roles: who’s flying, who’s handling navigation and radios, who does what in an emergency,” she explained. Chris, an experienced Cirrus pilot and former Cirrus regional sales director, was “cool as a cucumber.” Helena focused on systems, options and staying ahead of the airplane.

After roughly 20 tense minutes of partial power, they circled down to land

at Victoria – still their nearest and best airport. By then, the engine was coughing and spitting. They discovered they’d lost 4 quarts of oil.

Helena continued, “There was a three-day debrief after that, but we came away feeling really good about the decisions we’d made – wearing PFDs, limiting the low-altitude portion and climbing when we did. We gave ourselves options and proved we’re a good team.”

Through Her Daughter’s Eyes

Helena said her daughters are proud of her. On one flight, she flew her daughter, Mia, to New York for a summer internship. Mia spent most of the trip on her phone, barely chatting over the headset, which left Helena a little deflated until they landed.

“She said, ‘Mom, I made a video of you,’” Helena recalled. Over footage of Helena flying, a song played with lyrics like ‘She’s an icon. She is the moment.’ “Seeing myself through her eyes was a lot to take in. In a good way.”

Flying, she realizes now, is part of how she’s showing her daughters and women

of all ages what’s possible. She hopes her smile-inducing airplane will attract and inspire other women to reach for the skies, too. “I wanted them to see that they can do incredible things, way outside their comfort zones,” she said.

Helena has inspired not only her daughters and girlfriends to seek new heights, but one year after she began her journey toward her private pilot certificate, her older brother, Ofer Shepher, followed in her footsteps, in a Cirrus SR20, and began working toward his own pilot certificate, which he earned last July.

Today, along with flying, she’s finishing a life-coach certification and still occasionally helps students with college essays. She’s also an active COPA member, attends CPPP events and loves flying The Pink Panther.

She describes herself as having “fierce determination, a big personality and a lot of heart.” She is someone who loves people, fast cars, rugged adventures and bold fashion. The airplane, with its hearts, stars, pink and blue flourishes, and names of every instructor who helped her, is simply an extension of all of that. ⊕