

Marge Balazs enters a restaurant in Kenosha, Wis., and heads turn; even in 2007, it is unusual to see a woman in a pilot's uniform. Yet this United Airlines senior captain has spent 17 years flying wide-bodied jets alongside men. As a member of one of the earliest classes of Navy pilot candidates that included women, she's used to blazing trails. In addition to her pilot responsibilities, this UW-Parkside music major from the class of '79 has opened a vintage museum in Texas and still performs periodically with her classical guitar.



said. "Marge had talents in many directions, composing music, writing, playing."

Bedford doesn't have to tap very deep into her memory to recall Balazs; the two maintain a strong relationship to this day, often visiting during one of Balazs' frequent trips through Chicago's O'Hare International Airport.

After graduation, Balazs spent five years in active duty in the Navy, flying helicopters and studying engineering. After the Navy, she moved her home base to Texas so she could fly her 1956, four-seater Cessna year round. "You don't want to fly a small plane when it's below 30 degrees," Balazs said. She taught at a local flight school and worked on the development of naval combat search and rescue

might appear to require distinct skill sets, to Balazs the connection is clear. In both, she says, you are always "striving for perfection. You get an adrenaline rush from both performing and flying, and it's important in both cases to have good hand-eye coordination and the ability to focus on multiple things at once."

Balazs is not the only UW-Parkside grad to make the leap from music to flight. Two of her fellow classmates, Rick Kuiper and Tim Thompson (see related stories), have also pursued careers as pilots. Her eyes twinkle as Balazs recalls one of her rookie days flying for United. It was taking a long time to pack up all her gear and she felt rushed by the presence of someone standing in the narrow cockpit door. When she looked up, she was surprised to see Kuiper waiting his turn at the controls for the next flight.

Balazs has stayed connected with numerous people from her days at UW-Parkside. She joined forces with fellow pilot Pat Wegner, widow of her former Parkside music professor Augie Wegner, to purchase 100 acres of land with an airstrip outside of San Antonio. Balazs and Wegner share a passion for antiques and war memorabilia. In 2001 they collaborated to create the Shooting Star Museum, featuring antique farm equipment, gas engines, vintage automobiles, airplanes,

Balazs is the personification of a "can-do" attitude, which she attributes to her grandmother's hometown: Cando, N.D. The town was founded in 1888 when local residents fought against county officials who felt they couldn't survive by calling their town Cando. Balazs applies this attitude to her daily life. She worked her way through school, starting in security, but pushed herself to attend the police academy "in her spare time" so she could become a full-fledged campus police officer. All in addition to playing on the women's tennis and softball teams as a student athlete. Not content with one degree, Balazs went on to earn a second bachelor's degree in sociology from New York's Regents College, plus a master of aeronautical science degree from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida.

Can Do: Pilot, Museum Curator, ... Marge Balazs Does it All



Balazs focused her studies at UW-Parkside on the clarinet and classical guitar. Her former professor and

adviser Frances Bedford remembers Balazs as the one in the class who picked things up quickly and spent the rest of the time teaching her fellow students. "Gifted people have more than one talent," Bedford

helicopters, the HH-60H Jayhawk. The Coast Guard also procured a modified version, the HH-60J. The helicopter she helped designed was used frequently during Hurricane Katrina rescues in New Orleans, and was later featured in the Kevin Kostner film "The Guardian." Balazs joined United Airlines as a commercial pilot in 1990.

Although commandeering an airplane and mastering a classical guitar concerto

and much more. Bedford says the museum has a collection that "the Smithsonian would salivate over." In recent years, they have added hand-stitched quilts, toys, books, and military uniforms. Open on weekends only, the museum has become a destination in south-central Texas, attracting up to 250 people a day.

Certainly, Balazs is a woman who has not learned to sit still. Even today, between trips to Shanghai, special events at the museum, and classical guitar performanc-

TIM THOMPSON

Tim Thompson ('80), became interested in aviation at the urging of his father, a WWII veteran who had flown B-24s. Thompson started flying at 15, and received his pilot's license at 17. A vocal music major, he had plans to become a music teacher. It wasn't until he started student teaching that he realized he would rather be flying. He taught flying and worked as a corporate pilot before joining Northwest Airlines in 1984, where he is currently a captain, flying Airbus A330s.



Thompson credits UW-Parkside with getting him to where he is today: "Parkside was close and affordable, and had I not gotten a four-year college degree, I would not have landed a job with a major airline," he said. "And let's not forget that I met my wife at Parkside!" Kathy (Heide) Thompson was an education and piano major, and their relationship began when she accompanied his vocal performances. "She is still my accompanist when I perform and she accompanies our four children when they play, too." Daughter Kristen is currently following in her parents' footsteps – playing violin and piano entering her sophomore year at UW-Parkside.

Music majors clearly make excellent pilots. Thompson points out that "as a musician you have to be aware of what is happening around you musically; the tempo, the dynamics and what you need to do to blend in with the group. The same is true in flying," he said. "We call it situational awareness. The airplane, like the music, is always moving and you have to be one with it, but still ahead of it." He fondly remembers his late music professor Augie Wegner, who taught music theory and music composition. According to Thompson, Wegner was an extremely conscientious pilot himself, in addition to being an excellent musician.

"Parkside taught me to be prepared," Thompson said. "You need to be prepared when you show up for work or class. This carries over into my flying. You simply cannot be over prepared." Comforting words coming from a pilot.

RICK KUIPER

Rick Kuiper's path to the airlines came through a lifelong interest in model airplanes. He recalls being entranced by a plane flying in circles in the window of a neighborhood toy store, and collecting pop bottles in a red wagon to pay for his favorite toy. In the meantime, he became the organist at his church, and majored in trumpet and piano while completing his degree in 1977 at UW-Parkside. Kuiper spent three years teaching



music in the Racine Unified School District. He soon realized that teaching was not for him, and treated himself to his first real flight lesson on his 25th birthday. He went on to become a flight instructor, and joined United Airlines as a pilot 22 years ago.

Like fellow pilots and UW-Parkside music majors Marge Balazs and Tim Thompson, Kuiper finds similarities between music and flying. Both require you to work in concert with others, and to be keenly aware of your surroundings. He uses the same motor skills to play a church organ as he does to fly a plane – engaging both hands and feet. "You have to multi-task, and have good hand-eye coordination," Kuiper said.

Since Kuiper still resides in Racine, he's able to bring his family back to his alma mater for musical performances. They recently enjoyed a jazz concert under the direction of his former professor Tim Bell. Kuiper is encouraging one of his daughters to transfer to UW-Parkside where he said he had "a very good experience" as a student. He's hopeful she'll make the change: "Parkside was a big and important part of my life. I know she'll get a good education."

Today Captain Kuiper flies 757 and 767 jets on transatlantic flights, making his own music in United's friendly skies.



es, she finds time to remain active in the local aviation community by teaching flight students. She even takes care of most of the maintenance on her Texas compound by herself. Balazs tells the story of returning home late one night from a trip to China to find her landing strip infested with wild pigs. She and Wegner stayed up all night installing an electric fence, by hand, around the entire perimeter of the runway.

An inspirational leader, Balazs looks back at her UW-Parkside experience as being

very influential. "The success of the school required everyone's involvement ... and it allowed folks to develop skills outside their comfort level," she said. "Being able to succeed outside my comfort level has virtually allowed me to accept challenges in my profession that would otherwise seem impossible. If I haven't done a skill I know I can learn it; and if I can learn it – it's because of higher education." It seems that the "Cando" legacy runs deep within Marge Balazs. Her grandmother would be proud.