

became the first female space shuttle commander. Few people, however, know their names.

The Ninety-Nines, Inc., International Organization of Women Pilots based in Oklahoma City, wants to change that. With over 5,500 members in 35 countries, the Ninety-Nines has a mission to "promote world fellowship through flight, provide networking and scholarship opportunities, and preserve the unique history of women in aviation." The name derives from the 99 original charter members.

Earhart was the first president.

Just under 6 percent of pilots--private and commercial--were women in 2003, the last year for which statistics are available, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. Just under 12 percent of aviation students were women.

Psychology Is Main Deterrent

Castner, a member of the Ninety-Nines herself, said the genesis of Leaders Take Flight was, in part, due to her frustration with the lack of women in the field. After interviewing hundreds of women she concluded that the main deterrent for females getting into piloting was psychological.

"They thought they weren't smart enough," Castner said. "That really got to me. Those that did fly usually got into it because of a husband or father."

Such was her own case. Castner earned her pilot's license at age 22 in order to get her father's attention. "I saw the way he celebrated my brother getting his license, so I figured, if that was what I had to do, I would do it," she said.

Castner's father many years later actually lost his life in what she describes as a preventable plane crash. Castner stopped flying for 22 years. She passionately describes the moment when she finally decided to get over her fear and get back into the plane.



Leaders Take Flight students build skills by learning to fly.

"I was sitting in my office and all of the sudden, I smelled diesel fuel," she said. "My dad always smelled like that and I knew it was his way of telling me to get up there and stop making excuses."

She did, and decided that she would dedicate her life from then on to helping other women get over their fears and become the best leaders they could.

Castner and Stafford have followed up with their students to make sure their time in the sky translates into change on the ground. They e-mail participants and ask them to identify any decisions they made as a consequence of their experience with Leaders Take Flight.

Most speak of an increase in general confidence or improvement in communication skills, but one woman reported finally asking her