

Women set for take-off as aviation maintenance technicians

By Don Dobransky

As the airline industry battles on with a shortage of aviation maintenance technicians, more and more women are thriving in an environment of steel machinery, hot engines and some of the most sophisticated equipment technology has to offer.

A career in aircraft maintenance comes with the satisfaction of safely moving a nation, and this is just the beginning. Westwood College of Aviation Technology trains those women and men who ensure that safety.

Westwood has been responsible for providing 15 percent of the aviation industry's technicians for more than 40 years with campuses in Denver, Houston and Los Angeles. Their enrollment numbers have doubled over the past year to nearly 1,500 students. And the fastest growing segment of students is women.

"We've seen tremendous growth in our female student population, from two percent to seven percent in less than a year," says Dan Daron, director of avionics at Westwood's Denver campus.

Daron adds that women make "great aviation mechanics because

they pay attention to detail, can troubleshoot, and have great dexterity."

Women like Sabrina Cleaver are making the jump to this industry. After working as a secretary for 15 years, Cleaver found herself searching for a greater challenge, more options and a work environment unlike any she had experienced before. Initially, she thought about a career in airline customer service. Perhaps that would have been an easier transition, but after researching and talking to a friend in the aviation business, Cleaver became interested in the maintenance side of the industry. She soon realized there was a whole new world available to her if she was willing to take a chance.

"After contacting Westwood and speaking with a career counselor, I discovered there were more options for me than working at a desk," she recalls. "The counselor explained the need for women in aviation maintenance, and I immediately became interested."

Moving from an office setting is one thing, but moving to a work environment full of heavy machinery, rigging and turbine engines is another. Still, Cleaver claims that one of the greatest challenges for her



Vicky Horan, a mother of three and student at Westwood College of Aviation Technology

was switching to a career in a male-dominated industry. That did not deter Cleaver.

"Since I was open to work in a different environment and thrive on challenge, I decided to go for it," she says. "Rather than using a keyboard, I guess I wanted to take my experience working with my hands to a new level. I enjoy the sense of accomplishment when I repair something."

For Cleaver, Westwood was a natural fit.

"I chose Westwood because I wanted the best possible training, especially since the field was entirely new to me. After researching, I learned that Westwood is recognized as a top program throughout the industry."

Just three months after completing

me, and now, I can learn how aircraft work and be involved in fixing them," she says.

Seeing the lack of mentors for women in the industry, Horan is starting a support group to get more women involved in aviation. She hopes to see this support group spread to other Westwood campuses and beyond. The group will provide mentors, study groups, and a network link with women already in the field.

One of the first priorities on Horan's agenda is figuring out how to provide daycare to other working moms while they attend classes. So far, she is enjoying each class and learning how to troubleshoot technical problems.

"It's been a rewarding experience and I look forward to making a difference as an avionics technician," Horan says.

Cleaver and Horan's backgrounds, previous career paths and familiarity to the aviation field were indeed different, however they shared more than a few challenges in common. Perhaps the greatest similarity between them is the need to find balance as parents.

"I was a single mom, working full-time and studying at Westwood all at once," states Cleaver. "Sometimes you ask yourself if it's really worth

INDUSTRY: Trade School

TACTIC(S): Media Relations/Bylined Article in Local Papers

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