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# MIZZOU

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## Mizzou Grad Soars as Senior Airline Captain

**Robin Jones Shields felt love at first flight.**



In 1977, Robin Jones Shields, BS HE '79, was flying a Piper Cherokee.

*Story by Linda Geist. Photos courtesy of Robin Jones Shields.*

*Updated Nov. 14, 2012*

**W**hen Robin Jones Shields won a flying lesson during her sophomore year of college, her life soared to new heights.

She never had considered a career in the airlines until that experience. One glimpse of the Mizzou campus from the air forever changed her life. “All I could think of was that flight.”

Shields saved her tip money as a waitress to pay for flight lessons. It cost \$1,200 for the 40-hour training she completed quickly by taking lessons twice a day. She worked at then-Woods Memorial Airport and flew with co-workers logging the necessary hours to become a flight instructor.

Although she earned a bachelor’s in home economics in 1979, she never worked in that field. “I went straight from graduation to the airport,” she says.

She left Columbia to be a flight instructor and company pilot before joining American Airlines 28 years ago. Now she serves as one of the few senior female captains and flies a Boeing 777 on international flights.



Fewer than 7 percent of pilots in the U.S. and Canada are female. Shields is shown by the Rolls Royce engine of the Boeing 777–200, a 648,000-pound aircraft that carries 247 passengers.

According to industry reports, Shields is one of an estimated nearly 7 percent of the country's female pilots in a field that remains heavily male-dominated. Shields says she occasionally still encounters a passenger who is surprised to find that the captain is a woman. "They expect a big airplane like that to be flown by someone who is a big person," she says.

Shields lives in Naperville, Ill., and has two college-age children. Surprisingly, the profession is one that allowed her to be home nightly because of her seniority ranking.

The captain's seat allows her the "best view of any office in the world, and nothing else matters." And that makes time fly.



Shields in the cockpit of the B-777 in 2012.

*Correction: This story has been updated to reflect accurate statistics regarding the number of female pilots in the U.S. The plane in the above photo was misidentified. It has been updated.*

**Topics:** Alumni, Web Exclusives

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