

spins. I'm thinking to myself, 'God, I hope this guy knows what he's doing.'

"He picks it up and we just hover three feet off the ground. He could have stopped right there—I was sold. We finished the ride and it was *very* exciting. From there, I was driven. I pursued whatever it would take, which had a huge financial impact. The money I had saved for college went to 'helicopter college.' I signed up and started down the path through FAA regulations to become a certificated private helicopter pilot. Every day I showed up for my lesson and the instructor would hand me a new book—rules and regulations, aerodynamics, aircraft limitations, weather. I said, 'I don't want to learn all this; I just want to fly a helicopter.' Remember I was 19," she laughs.

"I became a private pilot. It took eight months; I had to spread it out to utilize my money. I also became a private airplane pilot, then a commercial helicopter pilot, which all took about two years.

"So, I thought, 'I'm commercially rated, I can get a job.' I had all of 300 hours. I submitted my resume everywhere I could think of. All I got was, 'Thanks, but no thanks. Not enough experience.' Looking back, if someone had sat me down and told me all that was involved and how hard it would be to find a job, I may never have done it.

"I couldn't turn back, but I was not going to be readily hired. Options were offshore oil support, commercial air taxi operators, flight instruction, tuna boat operators off large fishing vessels which use helicopters to spot herds of tuna. I was even willing to sign up for the army. Down to signing on the dotted line, they couldn't guarantee me a spot in flight school because of the influx of pilots from Viet Nam.

"My next option was to get a flight instructor rating allowing me to teach other people how to fly and get their ratings. I got that and was looking for an opportunity to teach. I got my first job with Helicopters Unlimited out of Oakland, with 300 hours of experience, teaching those with no hours." A career was launched.

"You're building hours while you're teaching, and building your resume. A couple years later I went to work for Helinet at Van Nuys Airport. I flew people from one place to another, worked my way up to assistant chief pilot and helped with flight school. It is a male-dominated industry. When I was hired, the chief pilot was a man and he was testing me. I got the call that I was hired. Later on I found out that he had had significant reservations about hiring a female pilot in terms of what customers would think. However, he enjoyed my presence and my skills, and decided to hire me anyway.

"We had a charter flight where I had to land on top of a building in downtown L.A. and ferry three gentlemen to Palm Springs. I landed and waited to greet them. The first thing they say is 'Where's the pilot?' I say, 'I *am* the pilot.' They had some reservations. 'Well, OK,' they said, 'Let's go.' That stuck with me because they specifically asked for me later. My attitude on the whole gender thing is that I don't walk around with a chip on my shoulder. Not only that, I want people to judge me on my merit, not my gender. That's always been my mantra. And I treat everybody with respect. So, I've never had a problem," Vicky states in her convincing way.

"I had an opportunity to come back to the Bay Area and got my first job with an air ambulance company called CalStar. By that time I had almost 3,000 hours, a magic number. As I had grown more knowledgeable about helicopters, my heart moved toward the air ambulance world. I had done my fair share of paparazzi photos, news-gathering, tours, VIP transport, movie stunt work, commercial work. All of that was fun, great experience and



Seeing an ad reading "Learn to be a helicopter pilot," Vicky Spediacci took one flight and was hooked. Today she is Helicopter Chief Pilot for REACH Air Medical Services.

exposure—it just wasn't fulfilling. I knew there were things helicopters could do that are more meaningful. So, I migrated toward air ambulance.

"I had associates and friends from REACH. REACH was interesting to me because they did instrument flying (flying using instruments only to navigate, whether in bad weather or at night). Instrument flying was a desired piece of my professional development CalStar didn't offer. I started in August of 1994. It's now going on 14 years for me at REACH. Before that I had been through a series of jobs all 2-3 years apart. I came here and worked my way up the ranks, initially as a line pilot. I have worn every hat that REACH has in aviation—safety officer, chief pilot, director of operations. Now my title is Helicopter Chief Pilot/Director of Operations.

REACH was started by Dr. John McDonald, a passionate advocate on behalf of patients and an early patron of improved trauma care in Sonoma County. Losing his life in an untimely solo plane crash, his passion and vision drive the company to this day, as it has grown to include ten bases in California, Oregon and Illinois. Being part of the growth of REACH keeps Vicky stimulated and happy. "I am one of the fortunate ones who grew up with this company. REACH has a very good reputation because we put the patient's needs first. As a result of being involved with the McDonald family, it's very familial to me. The organization has treated me wonderfully and I like to feel I have done that in kind. The leadership of REACH has allowed the flight department to take advantage of technological breakthroughs like night vision goggles and GPS. Because of this willingness we have a reputation as an industry leader. We couldn't do this without good leadership. It all adds to the ongoing excitement at REACH. It's growing, adding new people, new aircraft, new technologies," Vicky explains with excitement for the future of the company, her pilots and herself.

"Most of my life outside of REACH is deeply involved with my fiancé, John Coddling. He has three kids; John, Elisha and Jordan. I am very much involved with them. I love to play golf. I still have a motorcycle that I putt around on. We have a group of friends that we love to go on vacations with and that is quite entertaining—and I can unwind."

Vicky Spediacci, aviator, encourages young people to fly high as well. "Aviation is a bit of an enigma because you don't see aviation classes offered in school. When you speak to people who do aviation work, they somehow learned about it at a young age. Me, I just tripped over it. Today with the information age, there are a lot more doors opening.

"I say to young people, don't underestimate the importance of an education. Also, if there is *anything* you can set your mind to, you can do it. Everyone has an equal opportunity. Lord knows, if I can do it, anybody can do it. Put your mind to it and go do it." Our time together is at an end. Vicky has yet another training flight to make, all in a day's work.

Reprinted with permission from The Press Democrat Sonoma Woman publication.

REACH

AIR MEDICAL SERVICES

www.reachairambulance.com



Vicky
Spediacci
Flying for good

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue flight suit with an American flag patch on the sleeve, is working on the rotor hub of a red helicopter. She is looking down at her work. The helicopter's main rotor blades are visible, and the red fuselage is in the foreground. The background is a clear blue sky.

REACHing Above & Beyond

*“Mom,
what would you
say if I wanted to do something
that looked like becoming kinda
sorta like a helicopter pilot?”*

—Vicky Spediacci at age 19

It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s Vicky Spediacci, Helicopter Chief Pilot flying a bright red REACH Air Medical Services helicopter. How did the blonde girl from San Francisco and Marin become a highly proficient and highly respected helicopter pilot, of all things?

Growing up, Vicky was observant and admiring of the women in her life, especially her paternal grandmother and her own mother. In seeing how the untimely passing of their husbands so impacted their lives, the oldest of three children made deep-rooted decisions about how she would conduct her life on her terms, making decisions that took her on a path she’s on to this day.

“From a work ethic standpoint, my grandmother was predominant in my life. She lost my grandfather, who was a housepainter, and carried on his business. We grandkids would help her in the summer, putting up scaffolding, doing whatever needed to be done,” recalls Vicky with a far-away look in her eyes.

“My mother did the traditional thing; graduated from high school, married, became a housewife, had three children. I’m the oldest; when I was six my father passed away. From the viewpoint of a six-year-old, it’s traumatic, but life goes on. The lion’s share of it all was really on my grandmother, who lost both her husband and her son. And here’s my mother, a single

parent with a high school education and three kids, ages 6, 4, 2. She carried on, remarrying and finding stability with a new family.

“What I saw was vulnerability. I saw that my mom had no place to go, was dependent on my father. My choice was not to do that. That was my clear thought process,” she says with quiet conviction.

That clarity has brought Vicky to the pinnacle of a long and successful aviation career, the past 14 years with Santa Rosa-based air ambulance company, REACH. “When people ask me, ‘Vicky, do you have any children?’ I say, ‘Yes, I have 40 of them!’—all the pilots I manage at REACH. I say this with love in my heart. But it’s my responsibility to be sure that our pilots are proficient, safe and happy. My duties are training and education, evaluations, maintenance, test pilot work. When we were a smaller company, I was also a standard line pilot. We’ve grown so much that I don’t fly the line too often. I fly a lot now because of all the training and maintenance at our ten bases,” Vicky explains.

The air ambulance business involves about 50% transport of 9-1-1 calls like accident scenes and 50% facility-to-facility transports. REACH has a specialty in neonatal and pediatric transports. “In this business, people want to make a difference in people’s lives; we say, ‘If I can get them to the hospital ½ hour faster, that makes a difference.’ That is the humanistic way to look at it. As an aviator, I am forced to temper that impulse, because they hire helicopter pilots to make professional decisions, to not get caught up in the emotional aspects of patient care, which could cloud your judgment to make safe calls.

“Yes, you make a difference, there’s no doubt about it. And you can feel good about that. You learn to temper it, though. You don’t want to get too emotionally involved,” Spediacci says with the conviction earned through her many years of experience.

“This business is part adrenaline junkie. That’s part of the appeal. You get to do things that humans aren’t supposed to do—like flying itself. It’s fascinating as far as the beauty you

see. I can take people over Sonoma County at 1,000 feet and even if they’ve lived here all their lives, they may not recognize where they are. You see things differently,” she smiles dreamily.

So, with a job that is highly skilled, with the respect earned in a male-dominated industry, we can’t help but wonder how she found her special place in the wild blue yonder. “Maybe because of losing my grandfather and father, and being the oldest, I was one of those kids who was mature, independent, concerned about scholastics, wanted to do big in school. I was a tomboy, played as many sports as I could; learned to ride motorcycles and dirt bikes. I started working in high school so I could do whatever I wanted. My mother was extremely supportive for all my endeavors and made every effort to make whatever I wanted happen for me. She came to all my sporting events. She was always very helpful.

“With my drive for ‘I need to make a career for myself,’ going into junior college my initial focus was on business classes. Then I had an epiphany—‘This is really BORING!’ I didn’t

want to go to work on Monday wishing it was Friday. I thought, ‘I’m going to be working for the rest of my life, so it had better be something I like.’ I went to career counselors, looked into fire science and law enforcement. At age 19, I had a part-time job as a typesetter at a small newspaper. People would post classified ads and I would type them up. A guy came in and placed an ad that said, ‘Learn to be a helicopter pilot.’ I just paused. ‘Hmmm, that seems interesting.’ Until that moment it had never entered my mind. It had made an impression; I mulled it in my brain. The ad said you could go for a demonstration flight for a small fee.”

A supportive mom may have some limitations that need to be tested. Vicky thought, “How do I get this past my mom? One day she’s cooking dinner and I say, ‘Mom, what would you say if I wanted to do something that looked like becoming kinda sorta like a *helicopter pilot*?’ She said, ‘Whatever you want to do.’ So I called this gentleman up and went for a demonstration flight. I meet him, he introduces me to the helicopter, gives me the briefing. I thought it was kind of small. He’s using language I’ve never heard before. The engine starts. The blade