

SPOTLIGHT

Liz Wall Strohfus' legacy cemented among children, aviators, women

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Liz Strohfus speaks before the Christian Women's Connection at Faribault Moose Lodge on Sept. 8. (Photo by Mary Phipps/Kenyon Leader)

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At age 95, Liz Wall Strohfus toured the country giving 45 speeches, spending her final year inspiring children to chase their dreams.

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For her son Art Roberts, of Northfield, seeing his mother inspire kids was nothing new.

"I had a wonderful time with my Mom those last five years," he said. "It was just a joy to spend time with her. To have someone that old and that young at the same time was amazing. She was the youngest person I knew."

Due to his mother's efforts, Roberts expects a significant crowd for Saturday afternoon's dedication of what will be called "Faribault Municipal Airport – Liz Wall Strohfus Field."

On Saturday, Strohfus' friends and family will be in attendance to speak about her legacy during the dedication. Also, Sen. Amy Klobuchar will be there to speak about Strohfus' enduring legacy.

Strohfus was an aviation pioneer, one of the first women to fly in World War II as a member of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). In addition to her distinction as a WASP, she also fought to secure the right for WASP to be buried at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C.

In February, the Faribault City Council voted unanimously to rename the airfield after Strohfus. On Saturday, those she has touched will arrive at the Faribault Airport to honor her again as the sign bearing her name is unveiled.

The American Association of University Women-Faribault piloted the event months ago. Now with the dedication coming up this weekend, Gloria Olson is relieved and excited for what it will mean to Faribault women and girls.

"I think it's exciting for women because, in Faribault, we have many things named after men who have made a difference," she said. "To our knowledge, this will be the first major public space honoring a woman."

Olson, who suggested dedicating the airfield, said that her influence was no accident, but due to her devotion to telling her story.

"As far as young girls, Liz [Strohfus] spoke in so many schools," said Olson. "She loved reaching out to kids. I can just imagine what it must be like for girls now to see her name and think, a woman was a pilot, too."

"She's inspired so many people," added Karen Rasmussen, of the AAUW. "Teachers had her come to their classrooms and schools and all the students were mesmerized by her presence, her speech, what she did and what she accomplished."

With the expressed AAUW goal of supporting equity and education for women and girls, the Strohfus dedication "fits right in," said Rasmussen.

Roberts noted that his mother's purpose was always to "tell her story as long as she possibly could," and joked that she would often say she hoped she would die "with her mouth open and her shoes on" telling her story.

"She loved talking to kids," he said. "She enjoyed it like you wouldn't believe. She would tell them their job in life is to chase their dreams. As long as it's not immoral or illegal, go for it."

Strohfus, her son said, never understood why she earned so much recognition.

"She didn't get it," he said. "She was getting all these accolades and awards and really couldn't figure out why it was happening. She was just doing what she wanted to do: tell her story."

'A true pioneer'

Terry Baker described Strohfus as a "dear friend." He knew "Betty," as he calls her, for 25 years and often flew with her. At her funeral, he was chosen as a pall bearer.

"Betty was one of the most remarkable, unforgettable people I've ever met," he said. "She was unique, she was kind, I never heard her say a mean word about anybody ever. Upbeat, positive, she was a living example of the joy of life that people feel just by being around her."

His admiration for Strohfus is shared by some, but Baker's efforts extend beyond their friendship as well. Baker, who will be in Faribault on Saturday, will represent the American Aviation Heritage Foundation, a volunteer-driven nonprofit organization focused on preserving aviation history.

"Betty and her role as a WASP was such an important part of the history of military aviation," he said. "We want to make sure that her story and the story of the WASP are preserved."

To do that, he and nine volunteers at the Anoka County Blaine Airport have been working tirelessly to restore a B-13 Trainer, which is the same plane Strohfus flew.

While he could not guarantee the plane will be in Faribault, he said his volunteer crew is working hard to try and make Faribault the restored plane's maiden voyage. He said the chances of the plane making the trip were "50/50" as of Monday morning.

"If we can get it to the point where we feel it is safe to fly it, we will," said Baker.

Besides the plane, which is being restored in her honor and will eventually be flown to the WASP Museum in Texas later this summer, the American Aviation Heritage Foundation has also created an aviation scholarship in Strohfus' name.

The Gift of Wings: The Elizabeth Betty Wall Strohfus Aviation Scholarship Award was awarded for the first time this spring to a candidate that represented Strohfus' "spirit for flying" said Baker.

"Her role in aviation needs to be acknowledged and appreciated," said Baker. "She was a true pioneer. She opened doors to female pilots of all ages. Every military female pilot owes a debt of gratitude to Betty the WASP."

Baker said that "Betty the person" will also be foremost in his mind, but her efforts as a WASP, an advocate for female veterans and an ambassador for the city of Faribault should also be remembered.

"Her love of flying came through loud and clear," said Baker. "People were inspired to follow their own dreams of flying. We know for a fact that there are pilots flying today because they listened to Betty."

As people drive and fly in from across the region to honor his mother, Roberts hopes that her energy runs through the day's festivities.

"There wasn't a day in her life that she didn't appreciate the day," said Roberts. "If you were with her and you saw her, you knew it. She would walk into a room and she lit it up like a lightbulb."

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Liz Wall Strohfus Day in Faribault

Saturday, June 24 was proclaimed as Elizabeth "Betty Wall" Strohfus Day in Faribault.

From 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Faribault Municipal Airport is the dedication of Liz Wall Strohfus Field. The program will begin at 2 p.m.

At 4 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., local artist Steve Cloutier will show his film, "Betty Wall: Girls Don't Fly" at the Village Theater.