

# Arlene Walsh Lives On Through the Legacy of Dreamcatcher, Her Big-Wing Trailandrager

*Arlene Walsh in a Tiger Moth.*

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“Wow, look at all the pieces of wood! This must have taken a lot of time,” exclaimed Dylan Rubery, 14, an eighth grader at Begich Middle School in Anchorage, Alaska.

Dylan was present as the Pietenpol Aerial, a big-wing traildragger named Dreamcatcher, was unveiled on the Begich gymnasium stage. The aircraft had belonged to Arlene Walsh of the Rio Grande Norte Chapter who was killed in a single-car accident on May 30, 2007 en route to the National Biplane Expo in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Dylan and his classmates plan to finish the project Walsh began years before as an educational tool for her own pupils and for herself.

Arlene Walsh’s life was all about kids, airplanes and flying. Walsh, 71, was a Rio Grande Norte Future Woman Pilot and kindergarten teacher. Her legacies are not just the knowledge and enthusiasm she delivered to her pupils but also her love of aviation and the airplane she was building when she died.

According to her obituary in *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, Walsh fell in love with aviation listening to her three older cousins’ stories of their World War II flying exploits. She raised her children and managed a long teaching career in Massachusetts before moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1985. She taught at The Little School in nearby Cerrillos, New Mexico,

soon becoming head teacher. Transferring to St. Francis of Assisi Cathedral School in Santa Fe, she taught there until the school closed in 2006. Walsh’s final year teaching was part-time at the Garcia Street Club Preschool.

One pupil’s parent, writing in a *Santa Fe New Mexican* commentary piece, said, “In her kindergarten class, kids learned the names of stars...the life cycle of water...Overriding all was Miss Arlene’s love of flying. [Her class] went to the Santa Fe Airport every year. And they saw a grandmother — still working to make her dream possible, building her own airplane, studying for her pilot’s license.”

A perpetual student pilot with 200 or

so hours, Walsh kept a poster of a Cessna 152 cockpit on the classroom wall, at kids' height, along with an old headset so that her pint-sized pupils could pretend they were flying.

Pint-sized herself, Walsh started building her Pietenpol Aerial, Dreamcatcher, after her move to Santa Fe. She especially wanted to use the airplane as an educational project to encourage her pupils' interest in aviation. A modified version of one of the first homebuilt aircraft, originally designed in 1928 by Bernie Pietenpol, the Aerial was a two-place parasol — an airplane whose fuselage is suspended under the upper wing by a set of struts and/or cables.

Progress on the Aerial came in fits and starts, along with moves from her living room and porch to various workshops and hangars. After years in a small commercial park, Arlene moved the skeletal fuselage, empennage and wings to an EAA hangar at Los Alamos Airport (KLAM). Only a short while later, Arlene was gone, and Dreamcatcher languished.

Settling her estate, her children Ted Walsh of Conway, New Hampshire, Arthur Walsh of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Amory Walsh Hartman of River Edge, New Jersey, sold the pieces to Texan Oscar Zuniga. Because Zuniga needed only the landing gear and wheels to complete his own project aircraft, the rest of the Aerial was left in the EAA hangar at Los Alamos.

Back in September of 2008, Begich Middle School students watched and listened to Barrington Irving's story of his solo around-the-world flight in his Columbia 400. Irving, the first African-American pilot to fly solo around the world, was in Alaska to tell of his experiences during his 2007 flight. Part of his presentation showed Alaska's Hooper Bay High School and their "Build A Plane" project. Inspired and excited, the Begich students wanted to build their own.

Middle-school principal Jeanne Fischer searched for a project airplane, seeking advice from Angie Slingluff, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Aviation and Space Education coordinator in Anchorage.

Intrigued, Angie contacted Rod Stapleton, a member of both Alaska Airmen's


Association and EAA's Anchorage Chapter. Stapleton put out an Internet request for a project aircraft, and Dreamcatcher's new owner, Oscar Zuniga, answered the call.

"Be careful what you ask for because you may find yourself paying to ship a project to Alaska from some faraway place," Oscar told Rod Stapleton.

When Angie learned about Dreamcatcher, something sounded familiar. In July, 2008, she had met Susan Larson, then Ninety-Nines International Vice President, at the annual Conference in Anchorage. Susan had told Angie about Arlene's recent death and her airplane. Upon hearing about the Dreamcatcher, Angie put two and two together and called Susan, who confirmed that the airplane was indeed Arlene's.


Susan and Arlene met in 2002 after Susan's move to Santa Fe from California. Arlene's small adobe apartment was barely a block from Susan's vintage adobe in Santa Fe. Although they met during the annual spring cleaning of the local irrigation ditch, a Lenten tradition in New Mexico, the story they liked to tell was that Susan saw Arlene working on the wooden wing ribs on her porch, heating the ribs over a steaming pot in her kitchen so they would bend to conform to the jigs.

"The wing ribs were hung from the living room log beams," said Susan. "Walsh's building an airplane was all the more amazing because she had yet to pass her private pilot check ride." The two soon



*A teacher of young children, Arlene had always wanted to use the airplane project to encourage her students' interest in aviation.*

*Dan Carey, project manager for the Build A Plane project, inspects Arlene Walsh's Dreamcatcher with two Begich Middle School students. Photo by Rob Stapleton.*



became good friends and charter members of the Rio Grande Norte Chapter.

Meanwhile, in December of 2008, Rod Stapleton contacted Harry McDonald, a pilot, aircraft owner and also the owner of Carlile Transportation Services (CTS). Harry owned a trucking terminal in Texas that made regular runs to Canada via Albuquerque. He immediately agreed that CTS would carry Dreamcatcher to Anchorage for free if Rod could arrange for crating.

Angie put Rod in touch with Susan, who volunteered to oversee the crating. Jeff Scott of the Los Alamos EAA chapter volunteered the chapter's labor to crate the airplane. The Anchorage EAA chapter supplied the funding for crating materials, and CTS picked Dreamcatcher up at KLAM in January, 2009. She was on her way to Alaska!

In early March, 2009, to much drama, fanfare and spotlights on the school stage, Dreamcatcher made her debut at Begich Middle School.

Principal Jeanne Fischer explained,

"Look at all the cutting, carving and gluing, but this aircraft is only a little under half completed. It will be up to you, the students, to finish it." They will work on the aircraft with volunteer aircraft builders on Saturdays and over the summer.

In Anchorage, pilot and Begich Middle School teacher Dan Carey, who will instruct the students on aircraft construction, met and formed the Begich Build A Plane Steering Committee to organize and oversee the Dreamcatcher project. In January, the committee members, including the principal, other teachers, Angie, Alaska Airmen's Association executive director Dee Hanson, Rod, and Dominic Balappa, an airline pilot, certificated flight instructor and airframe-and-powerplant technician, met to plan the work on Dreamcatcher.

The mahogany and spruce Dreamcatcher lacked an engine, propeller, cowl, landing gear and wheels, rigging, struts and instruments. She'll also need seats, fabric covering, fuel system and tanks, an electrical system and a paint job. Anchorage EAA chapter member Lars

Gleitsmann queried Kevin Alexander, assistant professor of aviation maintenance at the University of Alaska/Fairbanks, about an engine for donation to the project. Alexander had an engine – a rebuilt O-290 – that would become Dreamcatcher's heart. One major component down, numerous to go.

"I have 10 pages in this notebook of people and local businesses that have supported getting this project started!" said Principal Fischer.

"This is an amazing story," said the principal. "The wooden control sticks have a Native American dreamcatcher etched into their tops."

The Rio Grande Norte Ninety-Nines already know Dreamcatcher's true heart will always belong to Arlene Walsh and not to the metal engine. Susan said it best in an e-mail to Angie last December, "Arlene would love to know Dreamcatcher is being finished by students." The Rio Grande Norte Ninety-Nines are certain Arlene is watching over.

*Unattributed quotes originally appeared in The Transponder, a publication of the Alaska Airmen's Association.*

## An "Unmanned" Flight



*Captain Patty Barrera, left, and first officer Anne Larsen, Bay Cities Chapter members and United Air Lines pilots, were delighted to discover recently that they had both been assigned the same four-day trip. Not only that, the three flight attendants were women also. According to Patty, they joked that they were flying an "unmanned flight." Their flights took them from San Francisco to Houston to Washington, D.C. to Mexico City and back ultimately to San Francisco. Patty says, "Other than a little turbulence, the flight was easy and relaxing, especially with such good company. It's amazing that with all of the female pilots who are at United, I seem to fly with another woman only a few times a year. The atmosphere in the cockpit can be so different...so uplifting...so full of camaraderie. It really is a special treat!"*