



BY TOM STORY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Southwest Airlines pilot Mike Lewis and daughter Nicole, 27, are the only father-daughter team working for a major carrier, according to the Air Line Pilots Association.**

# *The 21st Century's Answer To the Wright Brothers*

## Father and Daughter Team Up in 737 Cockpit

By KEITH L. ALEXANDER  
*Washington Post Staff Writer*

PHOENIX—Nicole Lewis was at the controls: focused, methodical, bringing the Boeing 737 in for a landing. The rookie Southwest Airlines pilot, barely 26 years old, pulled the nose down and aimed for Lambert-St. Louis International Airport on a bright morning last year.

In the seat next to her, the captain, 52, noted her speed—500 mph, too fast for this late in the process—and, as he recalls it, mentally flashed through his options: Take over? Speak up and tell her she was going too fast? Or give her another few seconds to correct it herself?

If he spoke too soon, he knew, he was likely to hear about it from this young co-pilot.

For the rest of his life.

The captain, Mike Lewis, is Nicole's father. According to the Air Line Pilots Asso-

ciation, they are the only father-daughter pilot crew at a major airline.

The Lewises stand out for another reason: They are among the 2 percent of the nation's pilots who are African American. Nicole is in another exclusive group: Only 3 percent are women. If you count her youth, you're down to an infinitesimal proportion of the people at the controls of U.S. aircraft.

How she was able to succeed—even excel—in an industry dominated by middle-aged white men shows how much American aviation has changed since the 1963 Supreme Court decision that opened the cockpit to blacks. Why there are so few others like her is a more complex story, but one that Nicole Lewis attributes to factors other than discrimination. Dealing with management, she said, she has always gotten a fair shake. As for passengers, her race and sex

See PILOTS, A2, Col. 1



# Father, Daughter, Roger, Over

PILOTS, *From A1*

aren't really an issue.

"People see my age first," she said. "I don't think they care that much that I'm a woman or a black woman. They say, 'Oh, my God, how old is she?'"

## Life of a Pilot

A pilot's life is a lot of waiting—for weather to clear, for a slot on the runway, for the aircraft to arrive—punctuated by brief periods of intense activity and concentration when lives ride on split-second decisions. Pilots spend nights away from home and family, have erratic sleep schedules, and work under the threat of terrorism. But talk to any pilot and the main thing that comes across is a passion for flight. Most never considered doing anything else for a living.

Marlon Green, the man whose years-long legal battle opened the cockpit to blacks, envisioned this life for himself. Remembering it now, 40 years later, from retirement in Miami, he reflects on his historic fight without a trace of anger.

On May 8, 1957, a date etched in his memory, Green was discharged from the Air Force after nine years of flying B-26s and SA-16s and he began seeking work in the private sector. That was the normal career course for white Air Force alums.

Green applied to 10 national airlines for a pilot's job that year, either submitting a photo of himself or checking the "colored" or "Negro" box on the applications. In each case, he either got no response or was told no jobs were available.

One of the last airlines he applied to was United. With his prospects fading, he recalls, he went to a recruiting office in Seattle for a walk-in interview. He remembers sitting in the personnel manager's office, dressed in suit and tie, and listening as the manager calmly explained that although Green had excellent flying credentials, he would never work for United "because I was a Negro."

That meeting changed his strategy, but not his determination. "I had never, never visualized the wall as being as solid as that," Green said. "I thought the wall was gone when I left the Air Force." Even so, "I didn't see any other prospect that I wanted to apply myself to. The carrot was dangling, and I kept pulling the cart."

Finally, when he applied to Continental Airlines, he didn't send a picture or check the race box. Weeks later, the airline invited him for an interview and a series of pilot tests at its Denver headquarters. When Green showed up, he said, "the complexion of the case changed." The meeting was cordial, and no one mentioned his race. But some time later, Continental notified him that no positions were available.

He filed a complaint with the Colorado Anti-Discrimination Commission, which discovered that the airline had hired five white pilots with less experience than Green had, and ruled in his favor. That was the beginning of a long series of legal actions that eventually took the case to the Supreme Court, which found in 1963 that the hiring of "Petitioner Marlon D. Green, a Negro" as a pilot would not place an undue burden on interstate commerce. The court ordered Continental to make a place for him in its next training class.

Green began work in 1965. Two years later, he was made captain. By the time he retired in 1978, the airline credited him with an extra eight years of service because of the time spent on his legal fight.

The battle was worth it, Green said. "I always thought of it as a job that was the best in the world." In the cockpit, he aimed for a polite relationship with his colleagues, avoided small talk and tried to focus on flying. "There were some people who were close acquaintances, but never friends."

An avid golfer, Green, now 74, jokingly says that retirement has been the best part of his professional life. "There was too much grief and struggle to look back on," he said. "The operating of airplanes was always the thing I found great pleasure in. It was a precious experience for me to be able to do it. I was part of a sea change in aviation."

Later this month in Seattle, where his eyes were first opened to the "wall," about 2,500 members of the Organization of Black Airline Pilots will honor Green on the 40th-anniversary year of his court victory. This will be the organization's 28th



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Nicole Lewis performs a visual inspection of a Southwest Airlines Boeing 737 this spring in Phoenix.



Pilot Mike Lewis is joined in the cockpit by his pilot-to-be daughter, age 3, in a 1979 family photo.

annual convention. It owes its existence in large part to Marlon Green.

## The First Flight

"You haven't seen a tree until you've seen its shadow from the sky," wrote Amelia Earhart, and Nicole Lewis feels the same way. "I have never been scared of airplanes," she said. "Airplanes are all I know. Since I was little, it's all I know."

She took her first lesson in the summer before her senior year of high school, a \$35 "discovery flight" in a single-engine Cessna 172. She and her instructor climbed to 3,000 feet at dusk. Then Nicole took the throttle for the first time, guiding the plane higher and lower against the orange-red glow of the setting sun. The city lights Colorado Springs danced and flickered below them. "I got to see the world from a completely different perspective," she said. "It was overwhelming."

By the end of the 30-minute flight, she knew what she wanted to do for a living. She had flown with her father since she was a toddler, and at one point thought she'd be a flight attendant, but this time there was a difference: "the fact that I was actually flying and had my hands on the controls . . . and being able to do something new that I had never done before."

Nicole completed 55 hours of flight, 15 hours more than required to earn a license to fly private planes, by the start of her freshman year at the University of Colorado. She transferred to Arizona State and majored in interpersonal communications—a blend of sociology and psychology—but her focus stayed on flying. Christmas, spring and summer breaks were devoted to it. She was aiming for a commercial license. "I had a goal and I was on a timetable," she said. "I just wanted to fly."

She found all doors open. Her first pilot's job was at Great Lakes Aviation, United Airlines' feeder carrier, where she had a perfect flying record, according to Jeff Pomeroy, Great Lakes' chief pilot. On her flying test for promotion she came away with one of the highest scores possible. At 22 she became a captain.

Still, "there was no time for dillydallying around," she said. "I was bound and determined not to waste any time. I am real action-oriented when it comes to the progress of my career."

Once, when she was filling out paperwork in the cockpit of a 19-seat turboprop before a flight, she heard a passenger questioning her credentials. She came out to coolly advise the man that if he was uncomfortable on her plane he was free to take another flight.

"If people don't like me, they can get off," she said. "I just won't be disrespected."

At Great Lakes, she flew extra hours and

worked through vacations so she could move up to a Boeing 737. She had long had her sights set on a job with her father at Southwest, and she left little to chance. The airline required three references with her pilot's application. Nicole submitted 22.

She was hired at the beginning of 2002.

"With her qualifications and background," said Greg Crum, head of pilot hiring at Southwest, hiring her "was an absolute no-brainer."

## View From the Cockpit

In her scrapbook filled with aviation memorabilia, Nicole keeps a portrait of Amelia Earhart and a photo of herself with one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, the black pilots who served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Do they represent her twin challenges?

"I don't approach my life that way," she said. "I don't think about my race or my sex. I just go do my work. I put that stuff out of my mind."

A child of an interracial marriage—her mother is white—she refused to see racism around her. Early in her career, Nicole said, some black pilots told her they were being held back from promotions because of their race. She didn't want to hear it.

"Some things really are what we make them," she said. "If we believe people are out there trying to find ways to stop us, we will find them. But I never thought people were out there trying to stop me. If that's Pollyanna-ish, I don't know."

Her father, who can remember being mistaken for a baggage handler early in his flying career, agreed that racism is rare today in the airline industry. In fact, he said, other African Americans are the ones who seem most shocked to see him in the cockpit.

Why, then, are there so few African American pilots?

No role models, said Bill Norwood, one of the first black pilots for United and who flew for more than 30 years. Blacks just don't think of airline piloting as a career for them, he said. "Until people see someone and can touch someone in a career that they can aspire to," said Norwood, 67, "it's hard to really believe it's something they can do."

Money is another reason, explained Nicole Lewis: "It's an expensive venture." Flight school costs about \$75 an hour, and pilots need at least 250 hours to qualify for a commercial license.

The numbers are not expected to change anytime soon. The airline industry is in contraction, with thousands of pilots laid off. Because of the seniority system that governs pilot hiring, the former pilots will be rehired before any newer pilots are considered—and they are overwhelmingly white.

## Different Landscapes

The bond between Nicole and Mike Lewis is apparent. Pictures of him in his uniform adorn her house—a ranch-style three-bedroom she bought just a mile from her parents and sister in the Phoenix suburb of Gilbert, Ariz. She drives a 2001 Daewoo, the same model her father drives.

They entered the business during two vastly different eras. When Mike started in 1979, flight attendants were female and called stewardesses. Passengers wore business suits or heels instead of flip-flops and shorts. No one imagined that pilots would ever carry guns.

Mike flew through the boom days into the current era of massive industry turbulence, underscored by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the subsequent downturn in travel. His résumé reads like a history of the great airline bankruptcies of the past few decades. He has worked for seven airlines, six of which have vanished: SMB Airlines, Frontier, Horizon, Midway, Braniff Three and Reno Air. "I was a beaten dog," he said, until he arrived at Southwest in 1994.

Nicole entered the industry at a time of transformation, symbolized by the influence and efficiency of the low-cost airlines. Southwest, alone among the major airlines, has turned a profit in every quarter since the attacks and has laid off no pilots.

When Nicole and her father fly together, confusion sometimes ensues. The identical surnames on the crew list have suggested to colleagues that the Lewises are married.

"Usually I get 'Wow, he got a young one,'" Mike said.

He admitted that he is probably more critical of his daughter when he flies with her, but he tries to treat her as he would any other co-pilot. On that early flight when the two first flew together, he said, he held his tongue as she descended toward St. Louis.

He saw that she was reducing her speed, though a little behind in the procedures—she was still making the transition from her years of piloting turboprops. As he kept in contact with the air traffic controllers, she activated the wing flaps, lowered the landing gear, touched down smoothly and taxied toward the terminal.

"The whole thing is a learning process," Nicole said, remembering the day. "If you have someone telling you all the time what to do, you'll just wait for someone to tell you."

As father and daughter both know, that has never been her style.