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WOMAN

TERRI POPE

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Up, Up, And Away

BY CAROLYN STEEVES • PHOTOS BY SCOTT STILES

TERRI POPE FLIES HIGH WITH AN AIRLINE CAREER

Most 19-year-olds have summer jobs at restaurants or camps. Terri Pope's summer job was at an airport ... and 34 years later, she's still loving her work.

Pope was born and raised in Owensboro,

Ky., where she liked to listen to the airline stories of her uncle, who was employed by Ozark Airlines. She eventually landed a job with Air Kentucky Airlines, at the regional airport where her uncle worked.

"I loaded bags, worked reservations and

cargo, and then moved to the ticket counter," she recalls. "When you're at a small airport, you get to do it all. I'm not sure if anybody at age 19 knows what they want to do with their life. I still didn't, but I really enjoyed the work and have never left it since!"

Today, Pope is vice president of operations for US Airways' Charlotte hub — the busiest hub in the nation for one of the world's largest airlines, and the second-busiest airport (after Newark) on the East Coast. She is responsible for overseeing 2,000 airport employees and staff who manage everything you encounter from the time you walk into the airport until you board your flight: the ticket counter area, customer service, ramp area, and even catering. She is also the main contact person for the City of Charlotte Aviation Department, which manages Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

"There are so many different [employment] avenues you can take at an airline that it keeps your interest and your excitement flowing," Pope says. "I know that seems odd after 34 years, but

she's not sure if any other career would suit her. "You have to be quick on your feet in this industry," she says, "because you never know what the day's going to bring. And I like that."

The spontaneity of her job is Pope's favorite aspect of it, but she acknowledges that it's also the most challenging part. "Everything, from 9/11 and other things that you just can't plan for, affects this industry," she says. "The president decides to visit Charlotte, and we have to halt traffic — it affects our operation. Every day is something new."

Off The Radar

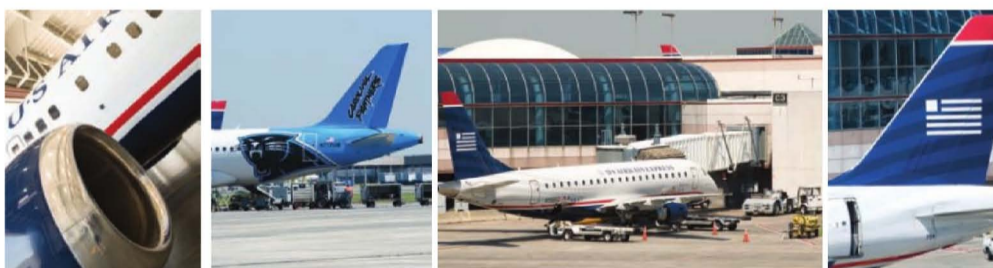
In a profession where the only thing that can be planned for is unpredictability, one particular day, understandably, stands out in

arranged for immediate necessities: transportation, cell phones, toiletry kits, and gift cards from local department and discount stores. The staff also had locksmiths on hand so that displaced passengers could get into their cars and homes. "We took special care of them when they disembarked from their flights back home," Pope says.

Entering New Territory

Pope has the distinction of being the first female director at an airport for US Airways. And although her ascent was not without challenges, she rarely considers herself part of a "man's world."

"I don't feel that today at all," she says. "I really don't. Thirty-four years ago, sure, I



US AIRWAYS' CHARLOTTE HUB IS THE AIRLINE'S BUSIEST IN THE COUNTRY.

there's still so much to do and so much to learn, it really is exciting. I absolutely love it."

Full-Circle Flight Plan

Pope has been with US Airways for 25 years. She started her journey in Pittsburgh; then worked in Boston, New York City, Charlotte, Florida, and Washington, D.C., before returning to Charlotte.

"The beauty of all of this is, this was the job that I wanted more than anything," she says. "The first time I worked in Charlotte, I worked for Watson Furr, who ran the hub at the time for Piedmont [which merged with USAir in 1989]. He was a wonderful person and he exposed me to so many elements of his job. I remember dreaming of someday having his job because I loved Charlotte and the people. To come around full circle like that meant even more to me."

Like any busy executive, Pope explains, in order to succeed each day, she needs to be tuned in to every detail of the customer experience, to stay extremely organized, and to focus constantly on multitasking. "There's truly never a dull moment," she says. "Your time is not your own in an airport environment!"

Being responsible for so many different dimensions of the airport experience also means that Pope's day is rarely predictable. Still, after 34 years in these surroundings,

Pope's memory: Sept. 11, 2001.

"I think that probably hit to the core and had the most emotional impact on the most people," she says. "I think that after so many years of emergency response training, the training kicks in and you force yourself to put your emotions to the side and immediately start the processes."

Pope learned a lot from that day. So what was the main lesson she took with her?

"To never get so wrapped up in things that you're not cognizant of the needs of people and you're not listening, really listening," she says. "That's easy to do when you've got so much happening around you, especially in a stressful situation or an emergency situation."

That well-learned lesson came to Pope's aid in early 2009, when the Charlotte-bound US Airways Flight 1549 made an emergency landing in the Hudson River in New York. "Again, it hit to the core of our being," she says. "I can't describe that feeling. It's a feeling of passion, ownership, and a responsibility to take care of the customer."

Pope remembers how her team sat in a room that morning and listed every single thing the people on the airplane would need when they eventually landed in Charlotte. Because passengers were forced to leave all of their personal belongings during the emergency exit from the original flight, her staff

think anybody in their profession would have said it's a man's world.

"I did have to work harder and longer, but it taught me a lot of lessons," she continues. "Years ago, if people treated you differently because of your gender, then shame on them. And maybe we should teach them a lesson that you work harder, you eventually get their job, and you show them how it should have been done. That's actually happened to me!"

What's important at this point in her career, Pope stresses, is that she worked hard, was given the opportunity to shine, and surrounded herself with a good team.

Pope explains that, at the vice president level, her job is now somewhat less reactionary, and more about strategic planning and looking to the future as the Charlotte hub expands. She's excited about what lies ahead, and she firmly believes that continuing to love what you do is essential to a successful and fulfilling career. "I tell my 16-year-old son to find something he loves and work toward that," she says.

Her passion for her work is what propels her through her busy days. "I honestly wouldn't change a thing in my career," she says. "I don't know many people who can say that, and I never let that go. I'm very thankful, because I don't think that happens to a lot of people." TCW