

# Susan Lapis

## SouthWings' Passionate Pilot is a Flying Friend to the Environment

"I am always so excited," says Susan Lapis. "It is just so fabulous!" The enthusiasm of Susan – for her life, her work, her husband, her children, her flying, her beach home, her bread baking, her quilt-making; in short, her what have you – is a dazzling thing to behold. It is a thing that goes far in illuminating just why the Bristol, VA aviator is the go-to pilot for people on a mission to save the environment. Let's say it is a reporter for *The New York Times* on a Very Big Assignment. Or a U.S. Congress member. Or even an impassioned volunteer for a committed eco-organization like, for instance, the Ohio Valley Environment Coalition. When they have a job to do – expose the horrors of mountain-top removal mining in Appalachia, say, or document evidence that trees of our national forests are absorbing moisture with the same pH as battery acid – who are they going to call?

Susan, that's who.

This volunteer aviator with South Wings, a nonprofit conservation organization that provides a network of pilots to "fly in advocacy for the restoration and protection of the eco-systems and biodiversity of the Southeast," in the words of its purpose statement, is who you want to call. Why? Because not only does the Cessna-flying physician's wife hold a Ph.D. in chemistry and thus will converse intelligently – enthusiastically – on every topic under the environmental sun, from ground-water pollution to strip mining to the plight of endangered wolves, but the 1,100-hour flyer will beguile you all the while.

Yet, Susan Lapis doesn't set out to

charm. "I am just the airplane driver," she says of the many SouthWings missions spent piloting to and fro a host of "movers and shakers, big time" for whom her admiration is major. "They have a real job to do," she says, "and when I can



help them do their work, that makes my day, my month, my year." But climb in the cockpit with this "driver" and you can't help but come under her spell. Depending on your work, she might fly you above the "pine plantations" of South Carolina so you can photograph the clear-cutting of native hardwood trees. Or, she might wing you through the "yucky air" of the area around her Appalachian Mountains home so you can see for yourself why, perhaps, children's asthma is becoming a growing local health crisis. Whatever your purpose, however, this SouthWings flyer whose 1977 Cessna-182 ("with all the bells and whistles") has logged so many volunteer hours that "it is part of my body," makes you know: she is with you.

"I understand the significance of environmental degradation," she says, "but I had no idea." Susan had no idea of the things "people are so shocked to see" back in 1978, when at the University of South Carolina, Chapel Hill, she was a newly minted Ph.D. She had no idea when, around then, she met and three months later married Jim Lapis, the marine engineer turned physician with whom she has shared 34 years of wedded adventure, including the joys of two adopted children (Irish pub manager John, 28, and artist Beth, 25) and an eventful love of flying. All that took was a family cruise to Alaska's inland passage. "We went on a Cessna floatplane tour and I went nuts!" says Susan of how she and Jim in 1992 came to acquire their wings together. "We were flying around the mountains, looking down on goats and bighorn sheep...

I was hook, line and sinker!"

And she still had little idea as through the years she pursued an absolute fantasia of passions, hobbies, obsessions, and projects. From teaching "science nerd class" at a college for older adults to working in the lab of a cancer research facility; from quilting, bread-baking, and hand-making Christmas presents to raising money for her local library; from hiking to tennis to an appreciation of classical music, Susan's many enthusiasms have always kept her purposefully – happily – occupied.

And then the idea descended. "SouthWings was a fluke in my life," she says. It was a radio show guest, an environmentalist, who in 1997 lit the fire. Susan says: "He was talking about



trees...pollution...and Jim and I are big hikers. I was really piqued by everything he said and later left him a voicemail. 'Can I learn more? Can I get involved?' He – who turned out to be Hume Davenport, a LightHawk pilot who founded SouthWings – said his group had no volunteer pilots. Was I interested? I said, 'Hell, yes, Hume. Sign me up.'

It has been a flying affair to remember every minute since. "A Cessna is a very powerful tool for the environmental movement," says Susan. She has flown everyone from the world's foremost expert on the Monarch butterfly to a scientist transporting endangered wolves for breeding. And whether it is a *60 Minutes* cameraman, a Sierra Club photographer or a member of the Library of Congress, the environmentally aroused passengers with whom she shares her cockpit never fail to find in Susan a soul whose passion for preservation of the natural world easily matches the importance of the work she feels they are doing.

"I am very humbled by what I do," she says. "It is very meaningful to me." Which is not to say Susan's Cessna is all work and no play. Every chance they get the couple, both avid outdoor adventurers, fuel-up and flee to some fabulous locale where sailor Jim can indulge his

passion for boats and sea-loving Susan can snorkel to her heart's desire. Hawaii. Costa Rica. the British West Indies. "We're pretty adventuresome," she says. With plans to canoe in the Great Lakes and take-off for Alaska ("that's our Big One; we're not quite ready yet"), Susan with Jim is very, very enthusiastic about the flying adventures in store, both for fun and for love of the environment. But of course. If it is Susan Lapis you are going to call, you gotta know: she will be thrilled to be involved. Lucky you. ✕



Lapis dressed as Amelia Earhart with a passenger, "Teddy Roosevelt," at an event to promote environmental issues (opposite); The impassioned pilot as "Mom" to daughter Beth and son John (above); A Cessna-eye's view of a mountain-top mine