

First female air traffic control tower manager at Eastern Iowa Airport brings visibility to field

'I want females to know they're capable of doing the job'



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[Elizabeth Wichmann, traffic control tower manager at The Eastern Iowa Airport, stands for a portrait Sept. 22 at The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids. Earlier this year, Wichmann became The Eastern Iowa Airport's first female air traffic control tower manager \(Geoff Stellfox/The Gazette\)](#)

CEDAR RAPIDS — When she started her career in aviation 15 years ago, Elizabeth Wichmann was used to being one of the only women in the room — if not the only one.

Now serving as the first female air traffic control manager for the Federal Aviation Administration at The Eastern Iowa Airport, she knows the significance of her visibility to women in aviation.

Today, she's one of nearly 6,000 women in the FAA's Air Traffic Organization.

"It wasn't always easy. At times, I had to work harder to prove myself, but I never let that stop me. In fact, I used that to push myself a little harder," Wichmann said.

The control tower manager at the airport, 39, fell in love with aviation as a student touring colleges. Her academic adviser saw the aptitude in her for aviation.

"I went up for my (demonstration) flight and I just fell in love with flying — that feeling and the whole aspect of flying from point A to point B," she said.

She graduated with a degree in aviation management in 2005 from the University of Dubuque and has been with the FAA for nearly 15 years at posts around the Midwest. She started working at The Eastern Iowa Airport in 2015 and worked her way up the ranks to supervisor before becoming a manager in the air traffic control tower in January.

Over the years, she's seen some improvements in the field and changes that give women more opportunities to break into aviation. The FAA has since established paid parental leave, for example, and a better structured bidding process gives women a better chance to land their positions.

With women making up only 19 percent of air traffic controllers in the FAA today, she doesn't take her role as a female manager lightly. Women can face intimidating prospects in balancing home lives with jobs that require more demanding hours.

But half the battle is visibility — letting women know what's available to them.

"I want females to know they're capable of doing the job. ... I want them to see it's possible," she said. "When a woman sees another woman doing the job, they see what their future can hold as well."

So part of her job is done off the field in education, where she shows girls what's possible. With job shadows, tours, school presentations and working with the Girl Scouts, the next generation is learning through her what exactly air traffic control is and how many opportunities are available in the field.

Most of the girls have surprising reactions to the simulations she uses to show what an air traffic control tower does. Through demonstrations and shadowing, girls and young women are able to see how the soft skills they develop early on — something as simple as remembering orders as a restaurant server or being able to do quick math in your head — can apply to intimidating fields.

"It's letting them know it's even an option. They think (we're) the people holding the orange cones on the ramp," Wichmann said. "It's really no different than being in the medical field, firefighting, EMT — we're needed 24/7 to make this the safest place in the world."

Simply put, one of the biggest barriers to women today is just knowing the jobs that exist.

Today, women are still in the minority in her field. But she's not the only one — giving her a chance to be a mentor every day as she leaves her mark as the first woman in her job at CID, the airport's call letters.

"I try to develop those leaders. You can do anything you want if it's a job you want to go after," she said.

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