

# The Power of One...

Don't underestimate your influence

In mid-May, I had the wonderful experience of hearing eight of the 13 women who were secretly tested as astronaut candidates in 1961... yes, 1961... speak at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh (UWO). Talk about an inspirational group of gutsy women who still have a lot of influence! If you're not familiar with "The Mercury 13," I highly recommend the book of the same title, authored by Martha Ackmann. (You can also read more about them in *EAA Sport Aviation* this month; see "At the Museum," pages 106-110.)

The Mercury 13 were awarded honorary doctor of science degrees from UWO during the university's spring commencement ceremonies, the first public recognition the women have ever received as a group.

As I listened, I wondered how it came to be that the UWO decided to honor these women. It's not like there's some obvious connection.

As it turns out, about three years ago the UWO administration developed a program called Odyssey for all incoming freshmen. Its purpose is to bring commonality to each student's beginning college experience. One part of that program is that every freshman read the same book.

A committee of university administrators and professors formed to select a book that had a social justice theme, a book that might spark discussion. Then Dean of Letters and Science Michael Zimmerman (now with Butler University) recommended *The Mercury 13*, and it was chosen.

For the past two years, each incoming freshman has received this book, and each semester author Ackmann, and Wally Funk, one of the Mercury 13, have visited the campus to speak to students. Inspired by the story of the Mercury 13's courage and commitment, some of the faculty and staff at UWO recommended that the Mercury 13 be the honorary doctorate awardees for the spring of 2007. UWO Chancellor Richard Wells accepted that recommendation, and the UW board of regents approved it.

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On May 12, 2007, 1,300 graduates along with their family and friends watched as eight of the Mercury 13 accepted their honorary degrees and listened as Ackmann delivered the commencement address, "The Sky's Not the Limit."

That's the story.

What struck me, though, is the influence one person, Michael Zimmerman, had. Because of his recommendation, UWO freshmen for

the past four semesters (numbering a couple thousand) have been exposed to this book. (I was a college freshman once; I won't assume they read it.) Then, several thousand more people who attended this spring's commencement ceremonies learned of the Mercury 13. Some 200 media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, *USA TODAY*, *Forbes*, and Fox network and CNN featured their visit and their story—including Wisconsin Public Radio, which fed the story to Morning Edition on National Public Radio. Now, it's safe to say that millions may have learned about the Mercury 13—all because of the initial action of Zimmerman and, of course, Ackmann, who saw a passing reference to the Mercury 13 years ago and followed through to write the book.

I think all this lends credence to anthropologist Margaret Mead's famous statement, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We EAAers have our own personal example of that in our founder, Paul Poberezny; his wife, Audrey; and their group of friends who started EAA some 55 years ago. How many thousands of lives have their actions touched or influenced?

So, when the kids aren't listening, when your boss grimaces at your latest brainstorm, or when you're feeling no one cares, remember this story and that one person *can* make a difference. 

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