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At 84, Ohio's Violet Blowers is ...

## Still Soaring

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*The Associated Press*

NEW CARLISLE, Ohio — As cold winds bump and jostle the small plane, the pilot wrestles the aircraft into landing position and tiptoes it down on a short strip of grass runway.

The single-engine Cherokee 140 begins to veer left and is deftly righted, pulling up short of the bales of hay that frame a nursery at the end of the landing strip at Andy Barnhart Memorial Airport.

The four-seater is pushed into a hangar, and out climbs Violet "Vi" Blowers, a silver-haired 4-foot-10 fireplug, wearing a tan pantsuit, amber-tinted clip-on sunglasses and white tennis shoes. She is back from lunch in Bluffton, a 66-mile hop she makes nearly every Monday.

At 84, she is the most active pilot at Andy Barnhart, logging 4,000 hours on the Cherokee she has owned since 1972. Her monthly fuel bill alone averages \$300.

To say Blowers loves to fly only hints at a passion she has had for 36 years.

She is one of only 12 women in the United Flying Octogenarians, a 420-member club for U.S. pilots age 80 and older.

Blowers cares for her ivory-colored Cherokee like a teenage boy with his first car. She sets it on the grass runway instead of the concrete strip to save wear and tear on the tires. She keeps the aluminum sparkling, drawing good-natured chortles from fellow pilots.

"They tease me," she said. "Every time I get a bug on there I'm washing it off."

Blowers caught the flying fever in the 1960s when a friend let her steer his plane during a flight from Florida to Ohio. When her husband, Emmitt, suggested they take up gliding, she insisted on learning to fly planes. She wanted to go places. The couple took lessons together and got their licenses a week apart in 1967, even before she got her driver's license.

Since then, the sky has been Blowers' little getaway.

"I think this keeps her young," said Paul Carter, a 62-year-old pilot who also owns a hangar at the airport.

The Federal Aviation Administration sets no maximum age for pilots, but every two years, those 40 and older must obtain medical certificates from doctors selected by the FAA. They must pass vision and hearing tests, and can be disqualified for certain conditions, including heart problems and epilepsy.

In 2003, 3,111 people age 80 and older held active-pilot medical certificates in the United States, an increase from 1,948 in 1999. Bob Vandell, executive vice president of the nonprofit Flight Safety Foundation based in Alexandria, Va., believes the rising number of older pilots is directly tied to the country's aging population.

Ninety-six-year-old Nathan Morris, of Stevensville, Md., began flying when he was 30, inspired by the feats of Charles Lindbergh. He has crossed the Atlantic Ocean eight times.

A retired electrical engineer, he still pilots his 1973 Cessna long distances, to Florida and California to visit his children or to Alaska for sightseeing. He said he gets little reaction from people when he lands at airports.

"They say I don't look my age," he said. "I'm fit as a fiddle. I just tire a little easier."

A petite woman with a boundless spirit, Blowers has been in 55 air races and has won more than 20 trophies.

Most of Blowers' trips — to Mount Victory, Middletown, Urbana — are short hops. They keep her sharp. She flies around the state to monthly meetings of The Ninety-Nines, a national organization founded in 1929 by 99 female pilots who support and advance aviation.

"She's just an unbelievable person," said her 63-year-old nephew, Jeffrey Jenkins. "She's very energetic, adventuresome. She's done so many things no one in the rest of the family has done."

The former Violet Weller was the youngest of four children who grew up on a family farm near East Fultonham in southeast Ohio. Like so many girls at that time, she learned to sew when she was 10. She graduated from Zanesville High School in 1937 and two years later married Emmitt Blowers.

During World War II, she moved to New London, Conn., so she could be near her husband, who served on a Navy submarine. When he was transferred to Pearl Harbor, she returned to Ohio and put her sewing skills to work, landing a job as a seamstress at nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

She made prototype uniforms for the Air Force and flight uniforms for the Thunderbirds, the aerobatic F-16 pilots. She later made flight jackets for former presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

"She still hasn't completely retired. She told me she was making a uniform for a general the other day," said friend Dottie Anderson, of Bluffton. "And she makes all of her own clothes. They're just gorgeous."

But sewing still takes second place to the air up there.

"It's a thrill every time I go up," Blowers said.

Her time in the skies has not come without a few scares.

Two years ago she was flying to Oshkosh, Wis., when the vacuum pump failed, disabling the indicator dials. Without the dials, pilots can become disoriented.

"My instruments were spinning," Blowers said.

She pressed on for fear there wouldn't be a replacement pump at a nearby airport. "I just had to ignore it," she said evenly.

Once in the late 1970s, her engine shut down as she was flying home from Xenia, 18 miles away. She was able to safely glide the plane in for a landing.

"I was all right until I got there, and then I just shook all over," Blowers recalled.

She has also been shaken by personal tragedy.

Emmitt, her high school sweetheart, died in 1982 after a battle with cancer. The couple had no children. Her second husband, Les Stamm, died four years later after suffering a stroke.

She never remarried, yet somehow that youthful enthusiasm is intact — quite possibly harnessed from the power of her fire-engine red, five-speed BMW roadster.

Clearly, she has no plans to fold up her wings.

"When the time comes," she said, "I think I'll know."