



Sierra Madre man documents women's history

By Stacey Wang, Staff Writer

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SIERRA MADRE - From the moment Violet Cowden learned to fly, she knew the sky was where she belonged.

Cowden, of Huntington Beach, was never scared to fly a plane - even during her 13-hour training lesson seven decades ago at age 21. For her, the hardest part was coming back to Earth.

"The minute I take off, even in the commercial planes, I am so comfortable," she said.

Cowden was one of the first female pilots to serve in World War II.

"At the time, I wanted to serve - not just the flying part," said the 93-year-old, who shared her story in a new women's history documentary by writer and director Randy Rice of Sierra Madre.

"Being that I already had my private pilot's license, I thought maybe that's what I could do," she added.

Despite her hope to do surveillance of Japanese aircraft off the coast of California, Cowden was restricted to flying in the continental United States because she was a woman. Instead, she flew airplanes from factories to training fields within the United States from 1943 to 1944.

Cowden was among hundreds of female pilots, known as the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), who faced scrutiny for serving in a male-dominated field.

"I did not let that bother me. I just knew that I had a mission to do and I was going to do it - nobody was going to stop me. And I think that's the way I've lived my life," she said.

It was unique stories like Cowden's that Rice wanted to

capture in his six-episode film, "Second to None," which celebrates the untold achievements of American women throughout history.

"I've been really humbled by (doing the film). Each episode is full of things I didn't know before I started," Rice said. "The stuff that's in the documentary isn't in the history books."

The film, which premiered in Los Angeles on March 16, was created as part of Farmers Insurance Group's national education initiative in honor of Women's History Month. It will be sent to classrooms across the nation free-of-charge.

"What impressed me about the videos was that when the women spoke and accomplished what they tried to do... they never demanded it. No, they worked for it," Cowden said about the documentary's other featured females.

"I never knew women were so wonderful," Cowden added, chuckling.



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The film highlights the stories of 27 women who have made a difference for women. It showcases important women's issues, from the 1800s to today, including the suffragette movement, female war veterans, and the creation of Title IX, which requires gender equity in all federally funded educational programs, including sports.

In creating the film, Rice realized that even today women still face hurdles because of their gender, despite their advancements.

Even for Cowden, along with hundreds of female WWII pilots, it took more than six decades until she was recognized for her service. She and 300 women received the Congressional Gold Medal on March 10, 2010.

"It's not over. There's still all these subtle prejudices," said Rice, who is also national manager of education programs for Farmers Insurance.

By showing "Second to None" in schools, Rice and Farmers Insurance are hoping to change attitudes and cultural beliefs, he said.

"I came out a better person, more conscious of women of the past and today," Rice added.

The filmmaker hopes that girls watching this documentary will become more confident, while boys will become more aware and sensitive to women's issues.

"Especially the history of women and what they've accomplished, it's going to help a lot of little girls," Cowden said. "I think (the film) will show girls that we can do it."

Farmers Insurance has a goal of sending out 40,000 copies of the documentary to schools nationwide this year. "Second to None" is the fourth documentary Rice has directed for the company.

To get a free copy of the film, educators can visit

www.gofarmersed.com/Second_to_None.aspx for details.

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