

Passavant home resident sees dream take flight

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By Kathleen Ganster

Passengers flying from Pittsburgh to Tampa Bay on a recent Southwest Airlines flight were more than surprised when they saw the brand new flight attendant helping them board. When the gate attendant asked them to "Welcome our honorary flight attendant, Leola Zialkowski," they rose from their seats and gave her a standing ovation.

Maybe it was because Mrs. Zialkowski is 83 and was finally fulfilling her lifelong goal to become an airline attendant. "I was just too short back then," she said of her younger days.

Mrs. Zialkowski is a resident of Passavant Retirement Community in Zelienople and was taking part in Second Wind Dreams, a program that helps senior citizens realize lifelong wishes. For Mrs. Zialkowski, it was becoming a flight attendant. At 5-foot-1, she didn't fulfill the height requirements the airlines had when she was younger.

"After we found out about her dream, I called Southwest Airlines," said Pat Goetz, director of Passavant's Community Life Program. "I had heard they are very customer-service oriented, so I thought I would start there."

It paid off. She was put in touch with Silia Holder, grounds operation manager at the airline's headquarters in Dallas. Ms. Holder not only made all of the arrangements with the airline for Mrs. Zialkowski to work, she also flew in from Dallas to oversee the experience.

"I couldn't believe it when [Mrs. Holder] called and said she was flying in," Mrs. Goetz said.

At the retirement community, arrangements were made for Mrs. Zialkowski to have her hair, makeup and nails done and then she was transported to Pittsburgh International Airport with her friend and fellow Passavant resident Delores Fruth and her two sons, Gary and Greg.

Once there, the airline gave Mrs. Zialkowski several gifts, including a smock that she immediately donned and filled the pockets with snacks to hand to the passengers. Mrs. Zialkowski, who uses a wheelchair, waited at the end of the entrance ramp, greeting passengers and giving them crackers and peanuts. "It was so much fun. I asked them what they wanted and just welcomed them," she said.

"It was wonderful. She was overwhelmed by the whole thing," said Mrs. Fruth, who is also on the committee for Second Wind Dreams. "Southwest Airlines went all out. It was just such a delightful day. ... And the passengers were just great. They all congratulated her."

After the passengers boarded, the airline took Mrs. Zialkowski on board and presented her with her wings. "I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe so much attention was being paid to me," she said.

Once her flight attendant duties were done, Ms. Holder and her colleagues from the Pittsburgh office of Southwest took Mrs. Zialkowski and her group to lunch.











Back home, Mrs. Zialkowski was eager to show her fellow residents the gifts Southwest had given her, including flowers, a balloon, T-shirts, the apron, a large teddy bear -- and the wings.

"I still have them on," she said.



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

Leola Zialkowski, 83, visits with passengers aboard a Southwest Airlines flight at Pittsburgh International Airport. The visit was part of Second Wind Dreams, which helps senior citizens realize lifelong dreams. Mrs. Zialkowski, of Passavant Retirement Home in Zelienople, had always wanted to be a flight attendant.

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Although she enjoyed the experience, once was enough. "I'm not applying for a job, but it sure was fun," she said.

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