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JEAN, LINDA, AND GIANNA pose in the late-afternoon sun at Scottsdale Airport before takeoff.

CELEBRATING LIFE OFFERING A DAY OF RESPITE

We lost a friend and neighbor last week. Retired physician Jim Mueller was one of those rare friends you needn't know long to appreciate. Inquisitive and funny, quiet but outspoken, Jim was opinionated but welcomed opposing ideas. When we congregated on Friday night to celebrate his life, Jim's family recalled "magical moments" they'd shared around his bedside, laughing and remembering through his final hours with Jim "quipping jokes to the very end." If one must go, this seemed the way to do it.

All this was on my mind when I awoke Sunday morning following the memorial. I was scheduled to retrieve Jean from Scottsdale that afternoon, and I wondered if Jim's wife, Linda, might find an aerial jaunt uplifting after all she'd endured, or whether such an offer would be insensitive so soon after her husband's

Gianna Sparacino, who was staying a few more days.

"Linda," I said, "I hope this isn't inappropriate, but I'm flying to Scottsdale this afternoon to pick up Jean. I realize you might prefer some private time right now, but..."

"Greg, that sounds wonderful! Could

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passing. Finally I decided that we were close enough friends that the bigger risk would be to not ask. If Linda wasn't ready to socialize she'd still appreciate my offer, but then again, this might be just the diversion she needed. So a bit apprehensively, I dialed her number. It turned out that most of the family had left, leaving only Linda and her son-in-law's sister

Gianna go, too? This is her first visit to Arizona, and what better way to see it than from an airplane!"

"Sure!" I said, delighted at Linda's spontaneous response. "Jean will be thrilled to see you; she has no idea you're coming." The girls insisted on driving to the airport, and helped pull the *Flying Carpet* from her hangar. My one concern

was that a forecast cold front seemed to be approaching early. Gusty crosswinds battered the runway, suggesting a bumpy ride through the mountains for first-time passengers. I needn't have worried.

"This is much smoother than I expected," said Linda, despite the bumps when we leveled at 9,500 feet. "I experienced far worse rides as a stewardess on United Airlines Convairs back in the 1950s." This was news to me.

"Airline flying was considered fun and exciting in those days, Greg, not like today. I remember we served in-flight meal trays atop pillows instead of foldout tables. We had to meet height, weight, and age restrictions to remain employed. And of course I had to quit when Jim and I wed because 'stews' weren't allowed to marry back then."

Gianna, who was visiting from Florida, had extensively flown the Caribbean in aircraft hardly larger than ours, and had tried her hand at parachuting. I was intrigued to learn her profession—Gianna is head hairstylist for the popular *Burn Notice* television series, and has worked on such films as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Twilight*, and *All the Pretty Horses*.

Jean was waiting when we landed at Scottsdale Airport. "This is a convenient fly-in location," I explained to Linda and Gianna, as we collected Jean's things. "We keep an old car nearby for running errands in the Valley. And Kierland Commons, with its shopping and dining, is only a few blocks away."

“Really? I love that place!” said Linda. “But I haven’t been there for years.” She checked her watch. “Do we have time to walk over there now for a late lunch? I’ll buy!” Clearly, we were brightening Linda’s day. And Linda in turn was delightfully diverting us from our routine.

“Sure!” said the rest of us in unison. We soon wandered the high-fashion shopping district in 80-degree temperatures—a stark contrast to the wintry weather at home in Flagstaff. Along the way, I spotted a dress in a shop window that seemed perfect for Jean.

“Care to try it on?” I asked. Not only did the dress look great on Jean, but it was on sale. Then Gianna took command. I’m no shopper, but it was fascinating to watch this consultant to the stars apply her aesthetic expertise in precisely setting Jean’s size and skirt length, and selecting impeccable complementary clothes and accessories, all in mere minutes. Jean led us out the door with a hefty bag of new clothes.

The girls laughed and sipped wine as we savored lunch together at an outdoor café. Linda reminisced about her days with Jim, and Gianna regaled us with tales of film and TV stars, and locations she’s worked around the globe. Then we clicked snapshots back at the airport in the warm glow of the sinking sun. Home-ward bound, Gianna photographed a ruby-red sunset crowning Lake Pleasant, and Flagstaff’s sparkling runway lights as we approached in darkness.

“Oh, Greg, we couldn’t have had a more wonderful day!” said Linda as she hugged Jean and me at our front door. “Thank you so much for inviting us. You don’t know how much I needed this!” To think that I almost didn’t call her, and we’d have missed this memorable afternoon. No therapy can permanently relieve grief, but flying with friends had delivered Linda a day of respite from tragedy, which is pretty amazing when you think about it. 📷

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).
