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Earhart celebrates 100th at Dedham library

by Mary Ellen Gambon

More than 50 enthusiastic children and adults celebrated the centennial anniversary of Amelia Earhart's birth Thursday at the main library by watching a character portrayal of the aviatrix by character actress Jessa Piaia.

Piaia brought Earhart's story to life, recounting Earhart's childhood and struggles to become one of the first women pilots in the 1930s. "Many of you have shared of my stories of my life in flight," she said. "I thought it was very important for a woman to do work that was just as important as a man's if she so desires."

Even as a child, Earhart knew that she was destined to follow a different career path from other women. "A friend of mine signed my yearbook 'To the girl in brown who walks alone,'" she said. "Other girls were into hairdos and boys, but I didn't feel that was as important as the news that we were about to go to war."

Earhart worked as a nurse's assistant in Toronto during World War I. "I would go to the airfield nearby and watch the planes take off and do their maneuvers," she said. "Each time I would see a plane, I was inside it. When I asked if there was anything I could do to learn, the pilots said 'You're just a girl.'"

While studying to become a doctor at Columbia University, she met pilot Frank Hawkes who took her for her first plane ride. "I felt that my spirit had never been so free," she said. "Every waking moment, I wanted to fly."

Earhart eventually took flying lessons from a female pilot, paying for them by taking jobs such as a phone operator, a packer for a moving company and a photographer. She earned her license within six months, and within a year set a new record for women pilots by flying 10,000 feet above ground.

In 1928, she became part of a three-person team that flew from East Boston to Nova Scotia in what became known as the "Friendship Flight." Earhart would later become the first woman to fly across the Atlantic alone. Her plane later disappeared during her attempt to fly around the world. She died three weeks before her 40th birthday.

"My only regret is becoming a sideshow curiosity," she said. "I wanted to be valued on my own merit."

After the performance, Piaia said she admired Earhart for her courage, and had aspired to fly as well. "I signed up once for flying lessons and took the ground class," she said. "I have a lot of respect for pilots."

Gretchen Reardon, who works in the library's children's room, said there was an ironic twist to the performance. "On (Piaia's) way here, her car broke down on Route 128 near the Route 9 exit," she said. "(Library employee) John Flynn had to go pick her up. We joked that Amelia Earhart had been found at last."

Members of the audience were impressed with Piaia's performance. "I learned about all the flights she had," said Julianne Warren. "She was an extraordinary woman, and I was amazed that she survived her flight across the Atlantic."

"She was very brave," added Kathleen McKenna. "She was able to fly across the Atlantic even though the wing of the plane had burst into flame and her hands froze from the altitude."