

## Young Miami women live their dream, fly 1966 Piper Cherokee in Air Race Classic



Sandy Gonzalez looks over flight plan with her father, Santiago Gonzalez, before she and Odanys Velazquez take off from the Miami Executive Airport for a cross-country race Tuesday June 16, 2015. | **WALTER MICHOT** - MIAMI HERALD STAFF

BY EMILY COCHRANE

*For the Miami Herald*

Sandy Gonzalez sat in the cockpit of a plane for the first time when she was 3 months old. It was the beginning of a passion she would share with her father, a former pilot and flight engineer. He would take her for flights, and she would wear his pilot uniform around the house.

Eight years ago, Santiago Gonzalez bought a 1966 Piper Cherokee, a plane small enough to shake with the weight of a person stepping into the cockpit. Sandy named it Mauricio, Mau for short, and she began to fly it regularly.

Sandy, now 20, and her friend and co-pilot Odanys "Odi" Velazquez, 21, will fly Mau from Monday through Thursday in the 39th annual Air Race Classic, an aviation competition for women. The Miami Dade College students form Team 55, one of 53 teams of female pilots who will fly more than 2,500 miles in hopes of placing in the top 10 and earning \$15,000.

"It's a sense of freedom," Gonzalez said. "I've never been outside the norms of a teenager before."

Santiago Gonzalez says he is proud of his daughter and "confident" she and Velazquez "will do well when they fly."

The two young pilots departed Miami Executive Airport on Tuesday and arrived in Fredericksburg, Virginia. They will have to complete nine legs between nine states, beginning Monday in Fredericksburg. To compensate for the different plane sizes in the competition, their only goal is to surpass a speed set by race officials by as much as possible.

"It's a thrill," Gonzalez said. "We're really excited, but really nervous."

In March, Gonzalez approached Velazquez, her co-captain on the Miami Dade College Flight Team, about competing in the race. With all of the race legs closer to the East Coast than in years past, the women figured it was their only chance to afford participation and gain experience.

While the race's proximity helped lower flight expenses, Gonzalez and Velazquez decided to use college tuition money to help pay for their expenses.

Velazquez said that despite now needing student loans to get a Florida International University degree in atmospheric sciences and meteorology, the experience is worth it.

"When you're down here in Florida, the flying community doesn't really go past North Florida," she said. "This is really our only opportunity to get experience with new elevations, mountains, conditions we're not used to."

The weather and unfamiliar terrain, including a leg over the Appalachian Mountains, presents new experiences and the pilots' biggest challenge during the race.

“It’s so unpredictable when you’re flying cross country,” said Will Shaw, a technical operator at FAA in South Florida. “What you’re forecasting isn’t always what it actually is.”

Shaw, who got to know Gonzalez and Velazquez when they competed on behalf of Miami Dade College, plans to track their progress using radar at Miami International Airport.

“It’s quite an experience they’re about to embark on,” he said. “I think they can win.”

Shaw joined both women’s families Tuesday morning to watch them begin the flight to Virginia. The families all wore red and white shirts with the team’s number and name, American Dream, as they clustered around the plane and took photographs of the two pilots.

Gonzalez’s mother, Martha, said that although she didn’t like her daughter flying, she supported her participation in the race.

“It has made my life crazy,” she said. “That [plane] is like a piece of paper. But she’s so confident. It’s a passion.”

Velazquez’s mother, Odalys Gonzalez, wiped away tears as she hugged her daughter good-bye. She said the 10-day trip will be the longest amount of time she’s been separated from her daughter.

“It’s amazing, a dream come true,” Gonzalez said. “But it’s my only child leaving the nest.” The two Gonzalez families are not related.

Velazquez, who gushes with excitement about her dream of flying into hurricanes as a NOAA pilot, said excitement was her main emotion about the race.

“I’m so happy when I’m up there,” she said. “Even the first time I went up to fly I was like, wow, I love this. I can make a career out of this? Sign me up.”

As the plane moved down the taxiway, she stuck her hand out the door for one final wave to her family.

“This is the American dream,” she said before they left. “And we’re living it, you know?”



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