

**Keeping calm at 30,000 feet:**

# Portlander Veda Shook rises to top job in flight attendants union

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

“Just about every flight attendant gets hired thinking they’re going to do it for a couple of years and see the world,” says Veda Shook, a 20-year Alaska Airlines flight attendant with ties to Portland. But some flight attendants discover a passion for the profession. They strive to make it a good career, not just a job.

Shook, on Jan. 1, took office as president of the 42,000-member Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) — 13 years after getting involved with the union. At 43, she’s one of America’s youngest national union leaders. She will steer a union that is straining to secure first-time contracts at newly-unionized airlines and mourning a spectacular union election loss among 20,000 flight attendants at Delta Air Lines.

Shook was living in a truck and camper when she first moved to Portland in 1991 with a degree in international affairs from University of Colorado Boulder. A friend suggested she apply for a job as a flight attendant.

“Flight attendants tend to have wanderlust in their personalities,” Shook says. That description fit her well.

Hired at Alaska Airlines, she fell in love with the job. But her co-workers

were at that time preparing for a high-stakes showdown with management. When contract bargaining broke down and a strike cooling-off period ended in June 1993, management imposed significant cuts in pay and pensions and declared Alaska Airlines a nonunion employer. To serve as strikebreakers in the event of a walkout by union members, Alaska trained hundreds of its office workers as flight attendants.

AFA needed a strategy, or all would be lost. So it tried something new: a campaign of picketing and intermittent strikes that it called CHAOS (Create Havoc Around Our System). Flight attendants would strike individual flights anywhere and anytime without notice. Management would never know, until a plane was about to depart.

“The public went bananas,” Shook recalls. “Bookings dropped.”

Union flight attendants committed civil disobedience and were arrested at Alaska’s Seattle headquarters. Several months into the CHAOS campaign, Alaska management agreed to a new contract — with raises of up to 60 percent.

Shook learned about solidarity on her strike picket line. But deeper involvement in the union was to come later. Low in seniority, she was fur-



**Veda Shook, then AFA-CWA International Vice President, testifies before the antitrust subcommittee of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, at an April 24, 2008 hearing about the impacts of the merger of Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines.**

loughed, and when she returned to work, she got very few shifts. A union rep fought to keep Shook from losing her health benefits, and not a moment too soon. At an annual training, Shook began to feel weak. Her skin had turned yellow. She was diagnosed with an

auto-immune blood disorder. Doctors had to operate to remove her spleen. Union-won health insurance kept her from financial ruin and maybe even saved her life.

Not long after, an Alaska manager, plainly unfamiliar with Shook’s health problems, called her in to warn that her attendance record was not up to the airline’s standards. Shook said it became clear to her in that moment how important a union is. So when a union rep asked her to get involved, Shook accepted appointment in 1997 as president of the newly-created AFA Local 39 in Portland, and went on to become a member organizer on AFA’s 1999-2002 Delta Air Lines campaign.

“That work fundamentally changed who I am as a human being,” Shook said. “I started working with Delta flight attendants and saw the massive subjugation of those employees, and the fear. It shattered my world to see what the difference is [between unionized and non-unionized workplaces].”

AFA lost the 2002 vote at Delta, but Shook turned her newly-honed organizer skills to get members at Alaska ready for the next contract campaign. She became top officer of all the Alaska Airlines locals, facing management in a new round of tough bargaining. She formed a committee, VOICE (Volun-

teer Organizers for Information, Communication and Education), and got members to approve a \$3 monthly assessment to fund member mobilization. She nursed her new-born daughter at the bargaining table, and broke into tears in a meeting with Alaska Airlines’ CEO at one point. But in the end, she helped win a contract that contained wage increases and more family-friendly work rules — during the post-9/11-period when other union groups were agreeing to across-the-board cuts.

In 2003, AFA merged into 500,000-member Communications Workers of America, keeping its autonomy and its own identity.

Then, after 15 years of living on-and-off in Portland, Shook won election as AFA vice president in 2006 and moved to Washington, D.C. She was put in charge of AFA’s organizing program, and helped unionize flight attendants at Lynx Aviation, Ryan International and USA3000.

She wasn’t given direction of AFA’s third union campaign at Delta, however, and it pained her to see the union lose. When 20,000 Delta flight attendants turned down union representation in a close vote, the sub-group of 7,500 flight attendants that had worked at merged Northwest Airlines lost their existing union contract.

Regrouping after that loss will be a task for the new leader, along with unionizing other airlines, and negotiating acceptable first contracts at recently unionized carriers.

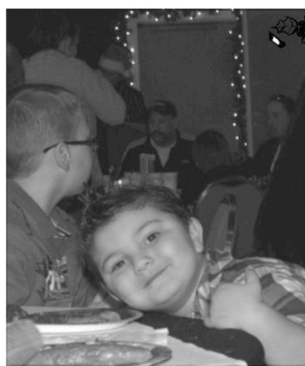
Shook also wants to push flight attendants to see themselves as first responders — not just high-altitude food servers.

“We’re paid to make our work seem effortless, to keep calm at 30,000 feet. And we’re so good at it that 90 percent of passengers don’t know when there’s been a medical emergency on a flight until we’ve landed,” Shook says.

Shook still works shifts sometime at Alaska, a habit which she says helps keep her connected to the job, and to AFA members.

“I love being a flight attendant,” Shook says. “This job is the best-kept secret.”

The AFA — Shook says — is what enables her and her fellow flight attendants to turn the job that they love into a career that can sustain them.



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