

**Keni Gray about her mother, Adeline Gray**

**June 2017 Presentation**

**at the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Adeline Gray's Historic Leap: June 6, 1942**

“First, I’d like to thank you all for coming [inaudible]. My mother, if she was alive today, she would be ninety-nine years old; that’s in February.

She entered Oxford Elementary School, and when she-

Her parents were originally from Belgium, they spoke German. Her parents only spoke German, so when she went to elementary school, that’s all she knew.

Luckily, there was a classmate that spoke German that helped her with English language. She graduated Oxford High School as valedictorian, so that was quite a thing.

At age 19, she urged her father to drive her to the Oxford airport on Sundays to attend classes and to fly. After learning to fly, she took parachute lessons. Her jumping instructor told her she was crazy. He didn’t think a woman could be a jumper. But she persuaded him otherwise. Three others, which were men, went through the studies with her.

She then had to apply through the state of Connecticut for permission to make the jump, and then she had to have the parachute she used inspected and approved by the state authorities. What a change now—you just get in a plane and jump.

Though parachutes had been used for nearly 20 years prior to then, there were not very many civilian jumpers. The first intentional free-fall jump was [...] on April 28, 1919. And the first emergency bailout was with a free fall rig made by a military test pilot, Lt. H. Harris on October 22, 1922.

In 1937 at age 19, Adeline qualified for her first jump. A state inspector was on hand to witness the 2,000 foot fall. She dove headfirst into space. She landed safely off the Oxford Airport, but she had earned the state authorization as a parachutist. She then began jumping at fairs and amusement parks and was paid \$30 to \$100 a jump depending on the level of danger. Amusement parks paid well because of the danger with the Ferris wheels and roller coasters and many other moving equipment. During the jump at the Lake Quassapaug Amusement Park jumps she found herself heading towards high tension wires, and fortunately, pulled fiercely on the shroud lines. Steering her just four feet away, landing on the middle of road in a traffic jam—The traffic cop saved her.

Soon after, she was invited to make the jumps at the 1939 Cleveland Air Races. She did 5 jumps including one spot jump competition and 3 group jumps. After 4 years in the air as one of New England's greatest aerial attractions, specialized in delayed jumps from altitudes of 7,000 feet or higher, she often carried a sack of flour to mark her trail as she descended.

On September 13, 1941, she was a member of the Howard Sky Devils, an aerial circus group did a 6,500 feet delayed drop from 8,000 feet opening her shoot at 1,500 to thrill the crowd of approximately 10,000 people at the [Betland?] Fair. During the descent she reached a speed of approximately 150 mph. It takes about a minute to drop 8,000 feet. As a member of the Sky Devils, she traveled the New England and New York circuit.

Her next goal was to become a commercial pilot. She completed her classroom training and logged the 200 hours of flight time and became a Federally licensed, commercial pilot. At the time the government was training ferry pilots to fly the newly-built military aircraft in the states and to overseas where needed. WWII was in progress. And women were needed so males could pilot and train for possible combat, rather than move planes from one place to another. Adeline was sure that she could reach her goal of being a ferry pilot.

However, in December 1941, just after Pearl Harbor was attacked, she was hired by Pioneer Parachute Company in Manchester, Connecticut, where she began packing the parachutes for the military and Pioneer in conjunction with Cheney Mills, also Manchester, was planning to make parachute canopies using Cheney nylon fabric to replace the silk material, unavailable from Japanese controlled Asia locations. The initial development of nylon, was DuPont Lab Researchers. Introducing nylon hosiery at the 1939 New York Worlds Fair. More than 20 tests of nylon parachute canopies were made using heavy weights with dummies, but a live subject trial was needed for military acceptance for their personnel. Adeline volunteered. [letter of acceptance submitted to Dottie]. On June 5, 1942 she made that parachute jump at Brainard Airport in Hartford with 50 critical Army and Navy observers. All went as planned on that sunny day and Adeline Gray achieved worldwide fame for her daring exploit.

Her celebrity status as a daredevil show woman led to product endorsements, such as Camel cigarettes in many magazines, such as Vogue, Glamour, to name a few, and Newsweek. Adeline, as my mother and my father, Kenneth Johnson—I was the first born, named after my father, K-E-N-I—together, before I was born, they

developed and patented a parachute release mechanism which could be release manually or automatically as a person was clearing the plane giving safety in the air. So, I was one of three children. I was the first born. They built their house in South Britain, just above the Housatonic River, it was the second lot from the Housatonic River, and the deed read 7 Teepee Plot. So, it was an old Indian site.

Adeline continued her love of flying. She had a Stinson which was tied down at Danbury Airport. On weekends we would go up. My father would check the plane over before take-off, and my sister and I would go up, and often I would fall asleep—it was so relaxing up there. My father and young brother, which he was probably just a couple of years old, remained on the ground as onlookers. The plane only accommodated three anyway. After a bad hail storm, the fuselage was badly damaged, and she had to sell it. Afterwards, she would rent a Cessna 150 from Oxford Airport to put the hours on to keep her license up.

In 1961, my father passed away. And Gus Graf, who will be spoken about shortly, sometimes flew the plane, a biplane that my mother jumped out of and sometimes jumped from the same circuit as my mother when she jumped. He would go up in a balloon and jump off the balloon. So, he heard through the airports that my mother was a widow. In 1966 he showed up at our doorstep, and he was a long-time divorcee with two grown children, and they dated, or saw each other, for a while and they got married October 29, 1968 in Litchfield.

After spending a month backpacking in Europe with my husband in 1975, I came back to find my mother on her death bed. And she did pass away too young and still beautiful on September 27, 1975. I had the privilege of laying her to rest as one of her pallbearers after much resistance from her brother and sister. She was very liberating woman faced with challenges, starting with her first day of school, but nothing would hold her down. Thank you.”