



By: Sarah Rigg

Executive profile: Kelly Burris, patent lawyer, Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione, Ann Arbor

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Aviation and the law might seem like radically different career fields, but for Kelly Burris, a patent lawyer with the Ann Arbor office of [Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione](#), the two dovetail nicely.

Burris started flying in 1985 while she was an undergraduate at Western Michigan University studying engineering, but didn't get in many flight hours in those early days. Still, after graduating from WMU, Burris was able to combine her engineering degree with a love of aircraft.

She spent 12 years as an engineer with McDonnell Douglas (which later merged with Boeing) working on new technology for aircraft in St. Louis. During the time she worked there, she was named as inventor on a couple of patents, and it piqued her interest in patent law.



Kelly Burris

When work in the defense industry slowed down, Burris went to law school at night as her "backup plan."

"I never really wanted to be a lawyer, but I thought it'd be a good match," Burris said. "To be a patent attorney, you have to have a technical background in engineering or another science. Most patent attorneys have a technical degree and experience in another career before becoming a patent attorney."

After the merger of McDonnell Douglas and Boeing, Burris began to pursue law full time in St. Louis. Later, she moved back to Michigan to work in a law firm in Troy. When it was time to become a partner in the firm, she decided it wasn't an ideal fit and instead moved to Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione in Ann Arbor.

Around the same time she began practicing law, Burris picked up flying again. She said flying is an expensive and time-consuming hobby, but as a lawyer who could mostly set her own schedule, she was freer to pursue it.

To get practice and accumulate flight hours, a flight instructor suggested Burris volunteer with [Angel Flight](#), a nonprofit that provides free flights to those with serious and unusual medical conditions who must travel for treatment.

"If you don't fly for a living, it's difficult to get your flight hours in," she said. "My instructor suggested I go fly with Angel Flight, get some hours in and help somebody at the same time. At first, I felt guilty. I thought community service should be something challenging or difficult, and here I was flying an airplane. But it's a win-win for everybody. We volunteer our planes, pay for gas and so on."

In 2008 and 2009, Burris put her aviation skills to the test



by competing in the Air Race Classic. The event is an all-female aviation race that dates back to 1929, started by famed pilot Amelia Earhart and other women aviators who were part of an all-women aviator organization called "[The Ninety-Nines](#)."



Kelly Burris with her nephew Eric Krause during an Angel Flight.

Burris won the Air Race Classic in 2009, beating 34 other teams on the 2,700-mile race from Denver to Atlantic, Iowa. She and her co-pilot donated the \$5,000 top prize to Angel Flight Central.

"There is more to life than the almighty dollar," Burris said. "You can choose experiences in life that feed you energy or ones that suck energy away. Angel Flight is an experience that feeds me energy."

Background

Age: 44.

Education: B.S. in aeronautical engineering, Western Michigan University; M.S. in materials science & engineering, Washington University; J.D., Saint Louis University.

Family: Single.

Residence: Ann Arbor.

Business Insights

Best business decision: Moving to all-electronic files.

Worst business decision: Any decision made in haste.

Best way to keep a competitive edge: Keep learning.

Personal hero: Pancho Barnes.

How do you motivate people? Let them have a voice.

What advice would you give to yourself in college? Relax.

Word that best describes you: Adventurous.

First Web site you check in the morning: [NOAA - Aviation Weather](#).

Confessions

What keeps you up at night? Nothing.

Pet peeve: Complainers.

Guilty pleasure: Facials.

First job: Mowing lawns.

First choice for a new career: Meteorologist.

Treasures

Favorite cause: Angel Flight.

Favorite book: "The Poisonwood Bible."

Favorite movie: "The Sound of Music."

Favorite hobby: Flying.

Favorite restaurant: Zingerman's Roadhouse.

LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter? Facebook.

Typical Saturday: Long run, domestic chores, some work.

What team do you root for? Detroit Tigers.

Wheels: Jeep.

Who would play you in a movie? Hilary Swank.

Sarah Rigg is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to AnnArbor.com. You can reach her at sarahrigg@yahoo.com.

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More Info:

More about The Ninety-Nines: Established in 1929 by 99 women pilots to provide mutual support and advancement of aviation, the Ninety-Nines Organization of Women Pilots has continued and expanded that mission. Famed pilot Amelia Earhart was the first president of the organization. Today, the organization promotes world fellowship through flight, provides networking and scholarship opportunities for women and aviation education in the community and preserves the unique history of women in aviation.

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