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## Hughes Aircraft Co.'s Legacy Comes out of Retirement

**Exhibit seeks personal stories from those who worked for the former aviation tech giant in what is now Playa Vista**

**By Christina Campodonico**



Hughes Aviation Co. as it looked in the early 1970s — Howard wouldn't recognize the place today

When JoAnn Cowans was working on a book of art and personal stories to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Marina del Rey, the artist and author wasn't expecting the research to lead her to Hughes Aircraft Co., the aerospace and technology giant where her husband worked for 12 years.

Discoveries from that search, including old copies of the company's newspaper "Hughes News" and material from her husband's archives, will go on display in February at the Fullerton Public Library in Orange County.

But Cowans says the exhibit is still missing an important element needed to bring the history of Hughes Aircraft Co. to life — people's personal stories, especially stories related to the Hughes campus that is now Playa Vista.

And all of them are important.

Cowans said she didn't realize how important her husband's story was until delving into it.

Last year she happened upon boxes of patents that Ken Cowans had developed while working as a mechanical engineer at Hughes between 1957 and 1969. Because of the often-classified nature of work being done during the Cold War, Ken and his fellow Hughes employees didn't often discuss what they were doing at the office.

So it was only in 2015 that Cowans discovered that her husband of 58 years had developed 16 patents while at Hughes and headed a team that developed a high-tech cryogenic cooling system.

"Hughes people don't talk easily. They were so used to not talking," Cowans said. "I was overwhelmed with the work my husband had done."

When Cowans was making these discoveries she was also reading "Hughes After Howard," which recounts how the company reorganized following the departure of its famously eccentric billionaire founder.

The book's author, former Hughes President D. Kenneth Richardson, will speak about his time at the company on Feb. 20 as part of the exhibit's run.

Reading Richardson's book and discovering her husband's patents led Cowans to drop her other project and begin assembling Hughes Aircraft memorabilia and stories for the forthcoming exhibition.

She and retired Hughes electrical engineer Larry Iboshi have solicited dozens of stories from former Hughes employees, but so far most of them are coming from those who worked at the company's Fullerton location.

Now they're seeking stories from those who worked at Hughes headquarters in what was then Culver City (now Playa Vista) to be part of the exhibition.

"Hughes Culver City [was] the motherland. That's where it started," said Cowans of the need for stories from the Westside.

She and Iboshi are accepting story submissions from former Hughes workers through Jan. 15. These written accounts will be placed in binders for exhibition visitors to explore.

"We want the stories that people share over the dinner table," said Cowans, who encourages would-be storytellers to not just refresh their resumes but recount meaningful memories from their time at Hughes, no matter how short or long that might be.

"A page or a paragraph will do," she said.

As for Cowans' story, she recalled how her world completely changed after her husband received a Hughes Fellowship to work at the company. The couple, about to be married, had plans to move from North Carolina to New York, where Ken was originally from and where Cowans planned to study art. Two weeks before the wedding, Ken told her that they'd be moving to California. He went to work at Hughes right away and pursued graduate work in theoretical physics at UCLA. She started taking arts classes at night, also at UCLA.

Yet stories like these aren't just for posterity but to connect young people to Hughes Aircraft Co.'s legacy and its impact on the current technological landscape, Cowans said. Some technologies — such as in-flight entertainment systems, communications satellites that power

XM Radio and DirecTV, and miniaturized computers that were a precursor to the smart phone — trace their lineage to Hughes.

“People tend to think of Hughes as a company of the past and something dead and gone,” said Cowans. “We are realizing how everything we have today had their beginnings at Hughes Aircraft.”

Send stories to Larry Iboshi at [iboshi@pacbell.net](mailto:iboshi@pacbell.net) or mail to 1668 N. Mountain View Place, Fullerton, CA, 92831 by Jan. 15. Submissions should be no longer than 1,800 words.

The Hughes Aircraft Co. exhibit runs from Feb. 1 to Feb. 29 at the Fullerton Public Library, 353 W. Commonwealth Ave., Fullerton. Reach the library at (714) 738-6334.