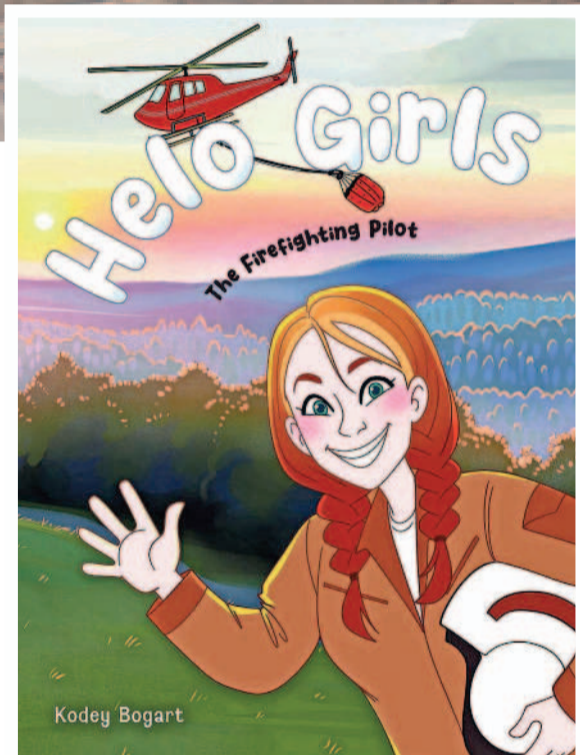


STYLE



The author of 'Helo Girls: The Firefighting Pilot,' combat veteran Kodey Bogart, 44, served several years in the U.S. Army National Guard. PROVIDED BY KODEY BOGART

SHE'S A MOM, WIFE AND A HELICOPTER PILOT

Now this combat vet's an author, too

"Helo Girls: The Firefighting Pilot" is the first book by helicopter pilot Kodey Bogart, a combat veteran, wife and mom of three. PROVIDED BY KODEY BOGART



Brevard author Kodey Bogart, a combat veteran, was inspired to write "Helo Girls: The Firefighting Pilot" after looking for something to read to her children that reflected what she did as a helicopter pilot. PHOTO BY SELISE ASKELAND/PROVIDED BY KODEY BOGART



Suzy Fleming Leonard
Columnist
Florida Today
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLA.

For Kodey Bogart, buckling in behind the controls of a Blackhawk offered a respite from life on the ground.

"As soon as you start to lift that helicopter, whatever other stress or whatever else is going on in your life, it has to stay on the surface, because you have to be immersed in the mission," the Merritt Island aviator said.

"You're always thinking about what's coming next. I think that's the thing I miss the most, just being able to escape the rest of the world every time I would fly."

Bogart, 44, served 12 years in the U.S. Army National Guard. Much of that time was spent

flying the Blackhawk during medical evacuation missions.

In January, Bogart added "author" to an already impressive resume that includes wife, mother, combat veteran, entrepreneur and pilot. Not female pilot. Just pilot.

Through her Helo Girls book series, she hopes to pique the curiosity of children and share with them how exciting and diverse a career in aviation can be.

Bringing Helo Girls to life

Her first book, "Helo Girls: The Firefighting Pilot," targets children 4 to 8, and features Abby, a pig-tailed pilot who invites the reader to join in a mission to fight a wildfire.

Bogart and her husband have three children, ranging in age from 6 to 17.

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They say life's too beautiful to rush in SLO CAL — and they're right

Maria Sonnenberg
For FLORIDA TODAY

The magic begins at San Luis Obispo Airport, picturesquely nestled amidst stunning hills that shimmer emerald in the spring and turn to gold later in the year. An open-air courtyard beyond security beckons for unwinding with a beer at this regional airport in SLO CAL, as this part of central coastal California is known.

The airport sets the tone for relaxation for the rest of the trip. Unlike many areas of the Golden State, SLO CAL is free from the bustle of big city life and its accompanying traffic woes. It does, however, offer incredible vistas, 100 miles of pristine coastline, amiable weather, stunning attractions that

include a magnificent castle atop a seaside hill, quirky accommodations and a robust foodie scene that boasts eight Michelin Guide nods, further strengthened by more than 300 wineries, many of these certified sustainable.

With a slogan of "Life's Too Beautiful to Rush," the county of San Luis Obispo, or SLO, is one of the original 27 counties in California. Approximately halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and worlds apart from these two metropolises, SLO retains a small-town character and rural atmosphere, yet offers many of the creature comforts found in more populated areas. Towns and cities, from "Wines and Waves" Pismo Beach to teeny Harmony (population: 18), offer a plethora of opportunities to stop and take it easy.

Charm at every turn

Take Cayucos, a happy hamlet of 2,000 lucky people who have the Pacific Ocean as their front yard. Cayucos is small, but people travel from all over to bask in the small beach town atmosphere and to glory in its food. This charming seaside village, right off scenic Highway 1, is home to culinary gems such as Hidden Kitchen (hiddenkitchen-california.com). From the exterior, Hidden Kitchen is, well, kind of hidden, but this is the place for waffles, and not your average waffles, either, but rather a blue corn waffle mountain such as the San Luis Sunrise, topped with two free-range eggs, Niman Ranch bacon, avo-

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The crown of San Luis Obispo County is without a doubt La Cuesta Encantada, the enchanted hilltop in bucolic San Simeon where media magnate William Randolph Hearst poured his love and his millions into a castle many kings would have envied. PROVIDED BY VISIT SLO CAL

SLO CAL

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cado and an incredible “proprietary” sauce.

Cayucos is also home to the Pacific Motel, representative of SLO CAL’s trend of upcycled boutique lodgings. SLO CAL, home to the world’s first motor inn, continues to build on that road trip destination heritage with new additions such as the Pacific. Crisp, cool and impeccably reimagined while still retaining the charm of vintage lodgings, the Pacific enjoys pristinely manicured landscaping, top-of-the-line furnishings and curated amenities, all within five minutes of the ocean.

The area’s major cities, San Luis Obispo, or SLO City, and Paso Robles, are still eminently approachable and espouse savoring life SLO-ly. Nicknamed Happy Town, SLO City earned the No. 1 Foodie City in California spot — and No. 3 in the country spot — in 2022, according to Yelp.

In both of these towns, the unexpected is routine. Wonderfully over the top in both lodging and dining is SLO City’s Madonna Inn, a historic hotel with such an abundance of lovable weirdness that is in itself a destination. Individually themed rooms include a plethora of the unexpected such as waterfall showers and sequined textured or rock walls.

The Madonna Inn is also legendary for desserts as extravagant as the establishment. The Inn’s Copper Café, as well as a labyrinthine and ornate restaurant wrapped in shades of pink, red and gold, serve signature Pink Champagne and Black Forest Cake in sizes so large there is still enough for take-home even after sharing.

California Polytechnic, the go-to university for the technicians in the Tournament of Roses floats, is based in SLO City and shares its energetic young vibes with the town. Many a student has left a chewy legacy at the city’s famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) Bubblegum Alley, a 15-foot high, 70-foot long alley covered with bubble gum left over by passersby. Bring your own gum when you visit to leave your gumprint for posterity, or until the next time the walls get cleaned.



In Santa Margarita, visitors can “Zip and Sip”: Margarita Adventures, across the street from Ancient Peaks Winery, takes guests to the 14,000-acre Santa Margarita Ranch to zipline high above the vineyards before returning them for a wine tasting at the winery. PROVIDED BY CHRIS LECHINSKY

The joys of ‘SLO City’ and Paso Robles

Downtown SLO City has plenty of charm, regardless of the bubblegum. Historic Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, where Father Junipero Serra first celebrated Mass in 1772, features contemplative gardens and a museum housed in the former convent wing.

A compact, pedestrian-friendly downtown features an abundance of unusual boutiques and eateries such as Novo, a restaurant that honors bold global flavors with from-scratch fresh cuisine made from locally sourced products. Its picturesque creekside patio is understandably busy, but perfect to take life as it was meant to be, slow and with joy.

Both SLO City and Paso Robles venerate the fruit of the vine, but it reaches fever pitch at Paso’s Tin City, an eclectic enclave of more tasting rooms, breweries, wineries and distilleries housed in a warehouse district three miles south of downtown. Parking is easy and strolling is encouraged.

Paso is justifiably proud of its world-class restaurants, including Michelin Star-rated The Restaurant at Justin and the Six Test Kitchen. The Michelin Guide also noted that Paso was home to The Hatch Rotisserie, Les Petites Canailles and In Bloom, of its “2023 New Additions to the California Guide,” which paves the way for reaching Star-status.

Many restaurants, including Fish

Gaicho, purveyor of award-winning modern Mexican cuisine, are steps away from the Downtown City Park, where finding parking is a cinch.

Before the area gained recognition for its wines, Paso was celebrated for its abundant thermal hot springs. The hot sulfur springs still flow at River Oaks Hot Springs Spa, Franklin Hot Springs and in select guest rooms at the Paso Robles Inn. At River Oaks, guests can upgrade to a wine tasting experience at a private vineyard-view mineral tub bubbling with Zinfandel-infused bath salts.

There is an artsy side to Paso, too. The beautiful sculpture garden at Sculpterra Winey and Vineyard blends the world of art and wine together as guests stroll through world-class outdoor art, glass of wine on hand. The awe-inspiring “Bruce Munro: Light at Sensorio” offers a multi-acre walk-through that includes a dreamscape populated by 100,000 stemmed glass spheres lit by fiber optics.

For remarkable scenery, journey on California 46 from Paso over the undulating mountains that separate the city from the epic ocean scenery along Highway 1. With so many perfect-looking vineyards beckoning, it will always be a case of so much wine, so little time when traveling in this part of the world.

Wine, dine and wind down

It is not surprising that SLO CAL’s

dining experiences are inextricably connected with wines. Vineyards such as Ancient Peaks in quaint Santa Margarita offer chef-curated winery lunches. Here, it is also literally possible to “Zip and Sip,” for Margarita Adventures, across the street from Ancient Peaks Winery, takes guests to the 14,000-acre Santa Margarita Ranch to zipline high above the vineyards before returning them for a wine tasting at the winery.

SLO CAL is home to more than 300 wineries, 50 of which have been certified sustainable for their efforts to conserve water and energy, protect air and water quality and preserve the local ecosystems. Tablas Creek Vineyard in Paso is the world’s first Regenerative Organic Certified vineyard (2020) and the first Regenerative Organic Certified Gold vineyard (2022). Little goes to waste in this golden land that treasures sustainability and preservation. The county has been blessed with a creative community who works magic with the region’s abundance. For example, even discarded grape byproducts become handcrafted spirits at RE:FIND Distillery in Paso.

The crown of the county is without a doubt La Cuesta Encantada, the enchanted hilltop in bucolic San Simeon where media magnate William Randolph Hearst poured his love and his millions into a castle many kings would have envied. Sweeping views of the sea are as opulent in their own natural way as the manmade wonder that is Hearst Castle, and both can be enjoyed on a visit to this ultimate road trip destination.

Ten minutes north of Hearst Castle reside California Central Coast celebrities of Rubenesque proportions, the 17,000 elephant seals that annually migrate to the Piedras Blancas Rookery to raise their families. A few miles south of La Cuesta Encantada is Harmony and its 18 residents and a bodacious bovine sculpture, a nod to the town’s heyday as the SLO CAL dairy industry capital. Alas, the milk money is gone, but Harmony remains, now an artist’s haven.

Whatever the town and the pursuit, SLO CAL focuses on enjoying the moment.

Really, why rush?

More information: SLOCAL.com.

Maria Sonnenberg is a Brevard-based freelance travel and lifestyles writer.

Bogart

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She was inspired to write the book after looking for something to read to her children that reflected what she did as a helicopter pilot. The books she found weren’t safety-focused and didn’t feature female pilots.

As she writes, her children act as sounding boards and editors. She reads the stories to them, and they offer their feedback.

Bogart’s 6-year-old son, especially, has gotten involved.

A comment from him served as a stark reminder of how children are influenced by what they see and hear.

“My little dude asked me, ‘Mommy, can boys be helicopter pilots, too?’” she said.

He knew he could be a fighter pilot, but his mother was his only experience with helicopter pilots.

It reinforced to her how important it is for children to see people like themselves reflected in books and on television — and in the pilot’s seat.

How it all began

When Bogart joined the Florida Army Guard in 1997, she hadn’t planned to fly. Her childhood hadn’t been idyllic. She was 17, about to graduate from high school in Lakeland, ready for a change.

She told her recruiter she was up for any job the Guard had available, and spent the first few years of her military career as a truck driver and a tank mechanic.

Her aspirations changed after she got to participate in a helicopter ride meant to raise soldier morale.

“I knew I wanted to be a pilot,” she said.

Unfortunately, though she met all the other fitness standards, Bogart’s vision didn’t meet requirements. She settled into a job in human resources.

Then she learned about a program that had been launched to study the effectiveness of vision-correcting surgery for flight school candidates. She signed up to participate and got the surgery.

“When I went to flight school, they would pull me out of class and check my eyes,” she said.

Her vision remained perfect, and she

was cleared to fly.

Bogart’s military career included two years active duty in Iraq. She’s a decorated combat veteran, having been awarded two Air Medals and a Sikorsky Rescue Award.

Returning to civilian life

Bogart left the Guard in 2009 and spent the next eight years working as an instructor at a helicopter training school in Titusville and flying for the Volusia County Sheriff’s Office.

She also earned a bachelor’s degree in aeronautics with a minor in helicopter safety from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and a master’s degree in aviation safety from Florida Institute of Technology.

She’s nearing completion of her aviation doctorate and is an adjunct instructor at Florida Tech.

In 2017, when Bogart was pregnant with her son, her husband suggested she start her own business.

Now, she serves as CEO of KB Solutions, an aviation consulting firm focused on Safety Management System development, implementation and

training.

Earlier this year, she received the Women Who Rock Excellence in Mentorship award from weVenture Women’s Business Center at Florida Tech.

Looking ahead: Toons? Dolls?

Meanwhile, “The Firefighting Pilot” is just the beginning for the Helo Girls.

Bogart wants to create Helo Girls dolls and she would love to see a Helo Girls animated cartoon.

“The Law Enforcement Pilot” is nearing publication, and she’s already started working on a third book about an air ambulance pilot.

Those books will feature Hispanic and Black heroines. And like the “Firefighting Pilot,” they will focus on safety, teamwork and excitement.

“At some point, I’ll probably do a military one,” she said. “There are tons of helicopter missions.”

Suzy Fleming Leonard is a longtime journalist and retired writer and editor for FLORIDA TODAY. Email her at suzy@321creates.com.

Check out helogirls.com for more about the book series.



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