NEWS RELEASE

Prince Street more than showed up, he showed the way for others

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Prince Street is the first to tell you he is no pioneer. He's just someone who loves working on airplanes. But as the first African-American mechanic, and eventually supervisor, for American Airlines in Tulsa, he is the definition of trailblazer.

Prince joined American in 1964,
after serving eight years with the U.S. Air Force. While he was with the Air Force, he went to tech school and started working on aircraft like B-52s, eventually becoming an instructor. But it was a difficult time. The Civil Rights Movement was just underway, and Prince had to overcome stereotypes from people thinking he was "just the supply boy," instead of someone who had worked and earned his way to the position of instructor like everyone else.

When he came to work at the Tulsa Maintenance Base, there were still obstacles to overcome, including managers who gave him a hard time. In fact, Prince turned in his notice after just six months. However, his good work hadn't gone unnoticed, and Ed Hewitt, a director in the turbine building at the time, convinced Prince to stay.

Prince spent 13 years as a mechanic, and, then in 1976, moved into training for building up and tearing down CF6 engines. Eventually, a supervisor position opened up, and Prince was approached by Norm Rice, a maintenance vice president, to apply. When the time came for the interview, he blew it off.

“I had no desire to be a supervisor,” Prince said. “I wanted to be an instructor. But Norm wanted me to be supervisor, and he told me to show up for the interview or I wouldn't have a job to come back to. Well, I showed up.”

Prince found that even as a supervisor, he still faced adversity. But what kept him going were people who included him without reservation, including leaders like Norm and Bob Crandall, CEO of American at the time.

“I do like it now, being a supervisor,” Prince said. “I love getting an aircraft repaired and getting passengers on a plane and to their destination, knowing they are safe. It's why I've stayed in the industry for 52 years.”

Prince continued to build a legacy, including being honored with the Charles E. Taylor Master Mechanic Award by the FAA in 2011. The award is given to master mechanics who have reached the 50-year milestone of service. Today, he co-leads a crew of almost 50, supervising production and overhaul on MD-80s. He is well-known across the base and has the respect of his crew, peers and leaders.

“As a supervisor, Prince has always been good to work with. He is fair, and he takes good care of you. He will always find answers for you, and has a great attitude,” said Tulsa AMT Darren Riedel.

After all this time, the entire journey he’s experienced at Tulsa maintenance is still fresh for Prince. He can still see in his mind where the bathrooms marked “Colored” used to be. But he has also seen a lot of positive change and says he doesn't regret his decision to “show up” years ago.

“I never thought of my story as being a part of American Airlines history,” he said. “I just think it's great to be part of American, period. I've always been proud to be here.”

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