

NEWS RELEASE

From the court to the air, leaving a legacy

2/15/2018

Throughout February, American Airlines is celebrating Black History Month with numerous events and initiatives. We're also taking this opportunity to highlight the stories of our African-American team members and the important work they do to make us the world's greatest airline. This week, Chicago Vendor Operations Manager Calvin, who recently celebrated 45 years in the industry, shares his passion for the airline industry, basketball and educating children.

While congratulating Calvin Hightower, manager, Vendor Operations, ORD, on 45 years in the aviation industry, Bill Tietz couldn't let him get by without a little humor. "No one would believe you would become a general manager; you were one of the worst agents I had!" joked Bill, who was formerly Calvin's supervisor at Allegheny Airlines. Today, Bill works as a planner at the Integrated Operations Center (IOC).

Forty-five years ago, Calvin was recruited to Allegheny during a pivotal time in history. The Equal Rights Act of 1972 had passed, prohibiting workplace discrimination; a decade of race riots was behind him; and the airline industry was going through a transition, with many carriers shutting down.

But Calvin, a former college basketball star, was ready to get in to the game — the new game that was the aviation industry. "My mother taught me and my seven siblings early on that without an education, you have nothing, and with an education, you can walk through doors, even the ones that are closed," said Calvin. With that advice, Calvin walked through several doors, advancing his career through five mergers and two name changes while holding the titles of ticket agent, ramp agent, shift manager, operations manager, general manager and now manager, Vendor Operations, at American.

"I was able to use the principles I learned in basketball and apply them to the mergers I've been through," said

Calvin. "From Allegheny to USAir, Piedmont, America West, US Airways and now American — each merger taught me the importance of being a team player and getting along with my teams." Each day, Calvin applies his experiences and these principles as he works to identify ways to support vendor partners.

Basketball was clearly never far from Calvin's mind, though. Luckily, his wife, Barbara, a former international flight attendant for United Airlines, found a way to combine their love of both basketball and travel. Barbara had watched children and teams fly from city to city to play basketball and often wondered, "Why don't we have something like that in our community?" And with that idea, the Traveling Wildcats, a community team for young basketball players in Chicago, was born. In 1991, Calvin and Barbara formed their first team. Since then, Traveling Wildcats has taken off, becoming a premier basketball organization in Chicago.

Calvin's passion for helping children goes beyond basketball; he also sits on Chicago's Board of Education in District 87, as well as on the Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare Board of Governors, which serves one of the largest community hospitals in Chicago's western suburbs. He describes his family as a team of athletes: Barbara is the coach and he and his sons are the players, with one of his sons following in his aviation-career footsteps as a manager with Envoy.

As Calvin remains dedicated to his teams within American and the community, he says his motivation is to influence future generations. "I do these things because I want to leave something for the next generations to come. I want to pass the torch so others can take it and run while I continue leaving a legacy for others."

Calvin and Barbara Hightower