American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Power in persistence: A history-making journey to the flight deck

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Almost every time Dallas Fort Worth-based Chief Pilot Charles Wheeler flies an airplane, he is reminded of his grandmother, Mumtaz, and just how much she believed in his dreams. Mumtaz paid for his private pilot training and encouraged him to never give up.

“My grandmother was not a rich woman, and when she gave me that money, it’s because she believed in me,” Charles remembered. “She was so proud of me when she saw me in my pilot uniform. This is a woman who was born in 1907, and the Wright brothers didn’t fly until 1903. Black people in her generation didn’t have many opportunities to fly. This is a woman who lived through Jim Crow laws, and all of a sudden, her grandson is a pilot. It was very impactful for her.”

The road to becoming a pilot was not an easy one for Charles. He began his aviation career nearly 30 years ago, in 1990, when he started as a ramp agent with Continental Airlines in his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio (CLE). “I never knew it was a possibility that I could even be a pilot until I got hired at Continental and saw people who looked like me flying,” Charles said.

Charles’ grandmother (second from left) and mom, Lynn (far right), with his two daughters.

So Charles set out to pursue his private pilot’s license. He completed training while working a variety of roles in the airline industry during a 14-year span, all while also raising a family with his wife, Kim. Charles worked as a station manager with Continental at Pensacola, Florida (PNS) and as a supervisor in Newark, New Jersey (EWR) and Columbus, Ohio (CMH). He also worked as a station manager with Northwest Airlines at Rochester, New York (ROC). He even stopped working for a while to focus solely on completing his license after his wife gave him her blessing to keep following his passion. In 2004, Charles finally made that dream of becoming a pilot a reality when he was hired

by ExpressJet Airlines as a First Officer.

“This meant the world to me,” Charles said. “I worked so hard for so long. I had delayed things because I got married and started having children. But it was my passion. To be able to finally achieve my passion in front of my mother, my grandmother and my family was huge.”

Charles Wheeler

While at ExpressJet, Charles was promoted to captain and chief pilot at Chicago O’Hare (ORD) and Los Angeles (LAX). He was the first African-American to become a chief pilot at ExpressJet. In 2014, he joined American as a pilot and was hired as a DFW-based chief pilot in 2017. Throughout his journey, he says the support of the women in his family has been his foundation..

“The women in my family have always been so supportive, and it means the world [to me] because I don’t want to let them down,” Charles said. “I think of my grandmother every day to this day. She lived to be 105 years old. At her funeral, someone tapped me and said, ‘Are you the pilot? Your grandmother talked about you all the time.’ I’m so thankful she was able to see me as a pilot, because my dream became her dream.”