American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Cleared for takeoff: A cadet's path to the flight deck and the women who paved it

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Brystal Duppstadt is among the first prospective pilots accepted into the first-of-its-kind American Airlines Cadet Academy. She's on pace to become the first woman to complete the instruction phase of the academy and begin the process of building flight hours toward her Airline Transport Pilot Certificate. And, she's the first person in her aviation family with a clear path to becoming a commercial airline pilot.

Brystal Duppstadt

But the Euless, Texas, native would tell you she's just like anyone else with a dream of flying.

"My biggest challenges were getting flying time and paying for it," Brystal said. "But in a way, that speaks volumes. It's a new normal for women in this industry."

A new normal, perhaps, but Brystal's path has still been eventful. Born with jet fuel in her veins — her mom was a flight attendant and her grandfather was a helicopter engineer — she always knew she wanted to fly. Her penchant for pushing buttons led her mom to suggest a career as a pilot. And throughout her childhood, Brystal dreamed big, convinced that one day she would work for a commercial airline — what she describes as the "best job in the world."

"No one told me I couldn't do it," Brystal said. "I didn't know right away how few airline pilots were women or the obstacles so many women faced breaking into male-dominated fields."

She would start to learn that lesson as her own challenges came into focus. Her mom had tried to become a pilot, but other responsibilities got in the way. Would they for her too? The cost of building flight time wasn't something

she could incur. But even if she could, where would she start?

“That’s a lot for a high school senior to figure out,” Brystal said. “I also had a scholarship offer from a college that didn’t have an aviation program. So, I figured if I couldn’t fly planes, I’d learn how to work on them. I just knew I had to be near planes somehow.”

Brystal earned a degree in mechanical engineering, but she could never shake that nagging feeling of wanting to be behind the controls. Halfway through college, her mom mentioned to a coworker — a female captain at her airline — how hard it was to figure out the first step.

“It turns out, the conversation was the first step.” Brystal said.

Pictured with Brystal, from left: Chris Broom, Managing Director of Flight and Training Administration for American and First Officer Jennifer Olson

That captain connected Brystal with Jennifer Olson, a Dallas Fort Worth (DFW)-based First Officer at American. Together, those women helped Brystal find a flight school, buy books and pay for her discovery flight. Jennifer also became her mentor, offering advice on how to build a career in the flight deck and introducing her to coworkers. One of them was Chris Broom, Managing Director of Flight and Training Administration for American.

“He took me on a tour through the Flight Academy, and I was pretty much sold on a career with American,” Brystal said. “But then he told me about this program the airline was starting, and I just knew there was no better way to do this.”

That program, the Cadet Academy, offers aspiring pilots the training, mentoring and support necessary to one day fly for the world’s largest airline, along with a guaranteed interview at one of its regional carriers and a defined career track to the mainline.

As Brystal prepared to apply, small airports became her second home, including one in the city of Justin, a community of about 3,000 people nestled about half an hour north of Fort Worth, Texas. She didn’t need another sign that this path was the right one. But she got one anyway.

“One day when I was out there, someone pointed me to the pilot of an antique aircraft and said I should go talk to him,” Brystal said. “I told him I was about to graduate from college and apply to the Cadet Academy.”

Unbeknownst to her, she was chatting with an American Airlines captain who had played a role in academy’s development. And, he had seen her before — in a photo that she had taken while inside a simulator during her tour.

“It turns out, another pilot had told him about me. He knew I was at a flight school at Propwash Airport and he’d been wanting to connect me with an opportunity for a scholarship that was founded in honor of a female pilot who had passed away,” Brystal said. “I couldn’t believe how this was happening. It was all so perfect. Everything just lined up — including, in a way, the help of this trailblazing woman who I’d never even met.”

Fast forward to today, and Brystal is readying for the experience phase of her training as a diverse new pool of cadets begins the instruction phase.

“It’s such an honor,” Brystal said. “So many people opened doors for me, particularly women. And as more classes have joined the academy, I’ve seen more and more women commit to this career. I’ve even had girls from high school who I never knew were interested in aviation reach out to me about this. It’s so much fun pushing this forward … even more so with women wanting to help other women.”

Jennifer continues to be Brystal’s mentor as she builds hours. Brystal’s mom is behind her too … being a mom.

“She gets teary about it all the time,” Brystal said. “She knows what to expect. When I come home from school, she’ll give me advice.”

And, with the benefit of her own experience, Brystal has some advice, too.

“If you’ve ever thought about flying and then don’t do it, you’ll regret it,” she said. “That was me for the longest time in college. But I just couldn’t get over it. And now, I’m living my dream. I’ve made lifelong friends in the other cadets. I basically gained a second mom in Jennifer. And in a way, I feel like pushing through the challenges and following in the footsteps of the women who broke down barriers in this industry is the best way to honor their legacy.”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s hard to be a woman here,” she added. “It’s an amazing culture to be a part of.”