

Focused on the future: American Airlines celebrates Cadet Academy's first year

4/30/2019

Keith Taylor, left, and his little brother are pictured following Keith's discovery flight in 2014

Keith Taylor has wanted to be a pilot for as long as he can remember. As a child, his mother took him to the park near Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C. (DCA), where he watched planes take off and land. His first discovery flight came at age 14.

"I thought it was the coolest thing ever," he said. "I could not stop smiling. It was one of the happiest moments in my life."

Convinced flying would be his lifelong career, Keith pursued his passion at every turn. He took flying lessons throughout high school with his parents' help. He double majored in Aviation and Political Science at Jacksonville University in Florida. And, he was accepted as a member of the first ever class at the **American Airlines Cadet Academy**, which 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.

Fast forward to today, and Keith is the Cadet Academy's first success story. In fact, he's set for life. As the first cadet from the program hired by one of American's wholly owned regional carriers – in his case, **Envoy Air** – he never has to interview again. He'll instruct, build hours, become an Envoy First Officer, be promoted to Captain and, in as little as six years, flow through to American, where he can live out his dream for the next 40 years or so. And the best part? He'll soon have a lot of company.

Welcome to the family

Cadet Erik Mejia with his mentor, American Airlines First Officer Alissa Wise

More than 8,000 prospective pilots have applied to join the Academy since its inception in April 2018; of them, about 550 were interviewed and 120 are in training. So far, 15, including Keith, have become certified flight instructors. The other 14, like **Brystal Duppstadt**, are working on their final qualification before they, too, will interview with either Envoy, Piedmont Airlines or PSA Airlines to officially begin their careers.

To celebrate, a symbolic graduation ceremony was held in March at the CR Smith Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. One of the speakers at the ceremony was Washington, D.C. (DCA)-based First Officer Alissa Wise. Pairing pilots with the cadets is a key component of the program so cadets can get first-hand guidance and coaching along their journey. Alissa mentored cadet Erik Mejia when the program began, but this was not their first meeting. A year ago, Erik was a flight attendant with American and worked a flight with Alissa to Antigua (ANU). Erik shared that it was his dream to become a pilot and he was thinking of leaving and going to school to pursue his passion. But with guidance from Alissa, Erik waited and applied to the Cadet Academy.

After he was accepted, Erik requested Alissa as a mentor. Mentorship pairing is a very detailed process; there are personality tests and assessments completed by a third-party vendor to make sure mentors have the best mix of qualities and commitment for mentees. Alissa and Erik were a match, and their partnership paid off.

“Having someone you can call at any time, who has walked that same line you are walking, is so helpful,” Erik said. “I felt well taken care of and that American and Alissa had my back.”

Alissa’s mentoring process with Erik will continue as he builds flight time. And while the goal is to help Erik and the other cadets, Alissa finds it refreshing as well. “I’ve relearned my passion for aviation,” she said. “It starts out as the smallest seed. When you do it every day, you lose perspective of that.”

The future is now

Back row, from left: First Officer Cory Glenn, First Officer Jason Harris, First Officer Tammy Binns and First Officer Heath Bowers. Front row, from left: Darryl Wyrick, Sr. Analyst, Pilot Career Development; Col. Charles E. McGee (Ret.), Tuskegee Airman; Heather Bowers, Manager, Pilot Career Recruiting; First Officer Antonio Verges and Harrison Hargraves, Sr. Analyst, Pilot Recruiting & Development.

A diverse pool of prospective pilots continues to join the American Airlines Cadet Academy, but the effort to recruit and retain the next generation of aviators can’t only focus on the here and now. That’s why American’s Flight, Flight Training & Standards, and Pilot Recruiting & Development teams are also focused on giving back to communities across the country by helping young people find their love of flight early on.

On March 30, a group of American pilots traveled to Moton Field (06A) in Tuskegee, Alabama, where more than 100 kids from the area were offered the chance to take discovery flights; participate in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) activities; and, of course, meet the pilots. Many of those who participated were from families who didn't have the means to expose them to aviation and could not afford the cost of discovery flights. American's sponsorship of the event made the experience possible.

In the foreground, First Officer Tammy Binns distributes wings to participants. Behind her is First Officer Heath Bowers and First Officer Cory Glenn.

"We truly believe that seeds of hope were planted at this event and that many of the kids walked away with new hopes and dreams of flying for American Airlines one day," said Heather Bowers, Manager of Pilot Career Recruiting for American. "This event was incredibly rewarding for our entire #AATeam."

All told, the Legacy Flight Academy, with support from American, offered 71 discovery flights during the Eyes Above the Horizon event.

"The weekend was proof of what is possible when people unite behind a common cause, letting us know that there's no problem we can't solve working together," said Dallas Fort Worth (DFW)-based First Officer Jason Harris. "I am proud to work for a company that embraces history, diversity and inclusion, and supports events such as this."

Eyes wide open

Cadet Keith Taylor is all smiles on his interview day at Envoy Air Headquarters in Irving, Texas.

Back at Envoy, Keith Taylor isn't slowing down. As part of the requirements he must complete before taking his seat in the flight deck, he's now part student, part teacher.

"I thoroughly enjoy flight instructing because I am teaching and helping develop the aviators of tomorrow," he said. "I also get to share my passion and love for aviation with others."

It's a busy schedule, but as he works to achieve his goal, Keith has made sure to take some time and reflect on his experience.

"I'm looking forward to working with some of the best pilots in the world, learning as much as I can from them and delivering world-class hospitality and customer service for decades to come," he said.

He also offers this advice to those thinking about a career in cockpit: "Just go and pursue your dream. Take a chance and bet on yourself. We only have one life to live, so live it to the fullest."

On April 30, CAE, one of the American Airlines Cadet Academy's training partners, announced that American would become a partner airline of the CAE Women in Flight scholarship program. **Read the announcement,** and learn more about the **scholarship program.**