American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Dreaming big in the Caribbean

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American Airlines celebrates National Caribbean American Heritage Month with the stories of two Caribbean-born pilots who never stopped dreaming big on their paths to the flight deck and the largest airline in the world.

CAPT. GARFIELD MCFARLANE

Capt. Garfield McFarlane

Capt. Garfield McFarlane knew he wanted to become a pilot at just seven years old, when he saw one for the very first time at the airport in his hometown of Kingston, Jamaica. “I was so impressed with the pilot’s uniform that I told my parents right then and there that I wanted to be a pilot,” he said. “They wanted me to be a doctor.”

Several years later, when he traveled on a Boeing 727 for the first time at the age of 19, his childhood dreams were rekindled, and he decided that he belonged in the cockpit.

The road to the flight deck, however, wasn’t easy. Five years passed before he could afford the cost of flight training. In 1987, he began that training at Wings Jamaica, and in 1988, he met the 40-hour requirement to get his private pilot license.

“It was a financially difficult time trying to make ends meet, so it was a slow flight training progress,” Capt. McFarlane said. “Through divine intervention, I was able to get the funds and find a more affordable flight school in Florida.”

Capt. McFarlane worked the night shift in Kingston performing heavy maintenance on the Boeing 727 and Airbus

A300 as well as the Douglas DC-8 and DC-9, and on several occasions during 1989, would board the first flight in the morning to Miami (MIA), attend flight school, and return to Jamaica later in the day. He also used his vacation time to continue his flight training in Florida and finally obtained his commercial pilot license in December 1989. He landed his first flying job with Leeward Island Air Transport (LIAT) as a First Officer in 1990. In 1996, he was hired by Air Jamaica as a flight engineer on the Airbus A300, later becoming a First Officer on the A320 and A321.

One of the first things he learned when he started working as an Air Jamaica pilot was that "passengers make payday possible," and that stuck with him throughout his 38 years in the airline industry. He also has very fond memories of one of his mentors, LIAT Capt. Ferdinand DeGannes. "He told me to remain humble and treat every employee with respect because their job was just as important as mine for the proper functioning of the airline," Capt. McFarlane said.

Capt. McFarlane was hired by American as a Flight Engineer for the 727 in March 2000 and has since worked his way up the ranks. He loves to meet people while traveling to different countries, especially throughout the Caribbean and Europe. He is currently a Captain on the Airbus A320 and also a pilot interviewer for the airline. "I look for honesty, good personality, and a strong desire to work for American," he said of the candidates he interviews.

Despite many obstacles, the seven-year-old Jamaican child who dreamed of becoming a pilot grew up to fulfill his dreams. He now looks for opportunities to instill the same dream in others, never forgetting the moment when his dream was born at Norman Manley International Airport (KIN) in Kingston.

"I always find the time to invite kids into the cockpit to show them how pilots perform our duties," he said. "And I am grateful for the opportunity to play an active role in providing excellent service to our customers."

CAPT. BASIL LOWE

Capt. Basil Lowe

Meanwhile, in Barbados, Basil Lowe always dreamed about flying. Literally.

"In all my recurring dreams as a child, I dreamt I could hover at will," he said. "Then around age 12 while reading a book discussing the top careers at the time, the top three mentioned were doctors, lawyers and pilots. That's when it clicked. Flying was my calling; I was born to fly."

Capt. Lowe attended the Caribbean Aviation Training Institute in Trinidad in 1980 on a full scholarship granted by the Barbadian Ministry of Civil Aviation to top students pursuing advanced studies in math, physics and chemistry.

Out of 65 candidates, Basil was one of two recipients. “My goal was to fly for one of the major airlines in the U.S., preferably American,” he said.

He landed his first job at Air BVI in the British Virgin Islands flying Douglas DC-3s, Hawker Siddeley HS 748s and Britten-Norman Islanders. In February 1997, when he became a U.S. resident, he found himself essentially beginning his flying career over again. He got back into the airline industry as a flight attendant for Carnival Airlines, landed a job with a cargo carrier as a 727 flight engineer later that year, and eventually became a First Officer. During that time, he joined OBAP, the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals, an organization dedicated to giving black professionals fair access to opportunities in the aerospace industry. His own opportunity came in October 1999 when he was hired by the airline he dreamed of flying for: American. “It was all I hoped for,” he said. “As they say, when preparedness meets opportunity, great things happen. And this was it.”

For Capt. Lowe, there’s nothing better in the world than working in the job you have dreamed of since childhood. Based at MIA, he became a Captain for American after 17 years with the company and often travels to the Caribbean. One of the highlights of his career was when he was assigned to operate American’s first Airbus A321 flight to Barbados. He was welcomed with a special reception by the Barbados Tourism Marketing Board and airport officials, and as the aircraft approached the gate, he opened the flight deck window and proudly waved the Barbadian flag. His 96-year-old mother was waiting for him as the aircraft pulled onto the ramp.

Capt. Lowe always encourages children to become pilots and invites them into his office, the flight deck, whenever he can. “I allow them to sit in my seat and take pictures so they can see themselves doing what I do,” he said. “Hopefully, I can do my part to inspire the next generation of aviators.”

Next year will mark 40 years in the airline industry for Capt. Lowe, and, given the opportunity, “I would do it all over again,” he said. “Without hesitation.”