

NEWS RELEASE

A champion for education

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Calvin Hightower says his work is nonstop. He manages airport vendor operations for American Airlines at Chicago O'Hare International Airport, and when he leaves for the day, Calvin advocates for kids in his community — from coaching in a traveling basketball league to fighting for a better education system.

"I'm motivated by the smiles on their faces. It's a blessing to have the strength every day to do this," Calvin said. "I was put here for a reason. I was put here to help, and I want to be remembered as someone who helped everybody."

Calvin points to his faith and upbringing as his inspiration to serve others. He was raised by a single mother who told him and his seven siblings that education can open doors. Today, he carries the same love for education that his mother held — and he wants to pass that passion onto future generations.

Looking back, Calvin marvels at his 48-year career with the airline. He was hired in the 1970's when the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 increased access for African Americans, which is something he thinks about more frequently during Black History Month.

"I can relate to all the disconnect [my community felt] back in the early 70's because I lived it," Calvin said. "But look where I am today. That's what Black History Month means to me."

Calvin is vice president of the school board in Illinois District 87, which is comprised of seven neighboring towns with diverse populations in the western suburbs of Chicago. He and his wife Barbara have lived in the district for more than four decades and they've spent those years mentoring youth and advocating for better education opportunities.

"When the neighborhood started changing, my wife and I said, 'We can either leave or we can contribute.' So we decided to start doing things that will better educate our [local] children," Calvin said.

Calvin and the school board partnered with the park district to start an after-school program that used sports as an extension of the classroom. The two agencies worked together to merge basketball with school curriculum, reinforcing lessons of teamwork, discipline and healthy competition. Calvin says the program had such widespread growth that he set up an entire traveling basketball league that has served as a safe haven for more than 5,000 kids over the past 30 years.

Calvin also focuses his attention in the classroom. He fought to improve classroom resources — adding technology, bilingual classes and a daily breakfast program to the district. In addition to all of these successes, Calvin has his eye on a bigger prize.

For the past five years, Calvin has been campaigning to strengthen the local school district and secured a \$105 million referendum from the tax payers of District 87. The referendum, if approved by voters in March, would fund construction to rebuild two schools and renovate four schools in the district.

"It was a community endeavor," Calvin said. "We hosted 14 community meetings in the last four months, and we've rallied residents and local officials behind us. We're really excited and feeling good about it."

Calvin believes it's his responsibility to set an example – not only for African American kids but for everyone he meets. He does that by showing students that their education is important enough to fight for, and he does it with a smile.

Calvin's teammates at American are inspired by his tenacity and positive attitude. No matter the circumstances, when asked how he's doing, Calvin has the same response. "Every day is a good day."

Calvin and Barbara Hightower with members of the Traveling Wildcats, a community basketball program created by the Hightowers.