American Airlines Newsroom

NEWS RELEASE

Determination and a strong support system — First Office Charlene Shortte's recipe for success

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American Airlines First Officer Charlene Shortte didn't know that becoming a pilot was an option for her growing up. The Landover, Maryland, native thought she didn't quite fit the mold of what a traditional pilot looked like. Back then, there weren't many African American female pilots for her to look up to. But as she got older, she said the mentorship and encouragement she received along her path to becoming a pilot from those who came before her helped lead her to success.

Charlene was encouraged to join the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) when she was in high school, and later took her mother's advice to continue down a military career path. She enrolled in the U.S. Air Force Academy and later transitioned into the U.S. Air Force.

Charlene had become interested in a pilot training program the Air Force offered. However, she knew she didn't have the vision requirements to become a pilot, and she always thought perfect vision was mandatory to fly aircraft. She later discovered that she could, in fact, still qualify for the pilot program with a special vision waiver, which she received.

During her journey to becoming a pilot, imperfect vision wasn't her only obstacle. She received a great deal of criticism from other cadets about how it wasn't likely that she would actually be a pilot, not due to her lack of ability, but because she was more reserved and less aggressive than some of the other cadets, as well as the fact that it wasn't common to see African American women on the flight deck piloting an aircraft. She was determined to prove the naysayers wrong.

Charlene said she had just as many champions as naysayers, if not more. Peers were rooting for her and became a

strong support system as she navigated toward her dream.

“It seemed like every time I got discouraged about the negativity from my peers or about the demands of the pilot training program, someone who I didn’t expect would be right there to lift me up and encourage me,” she said. “From pilot instructors to Air Force officers and other cadets, I had positive influences and people who looked out for me every step of the way.”

Charlene found role models in the African American women pilots that came before her. Captain Theresa Claiborne, the first African American woman to fly in the Air Force; Lt. General Stayce Harris, the Inspector General of the Air Force; Beth Powell, First Officer at American and Nia Wordlaw, cofounder of Sisters of the Skies, an organization that American supports that cultivates and promotes young aviators of color are some of Charlene’s role models and helped pave the way for her to be where she is today.

Charlene served in the Air Force for more than 11 years, with most of that time spent as a pilot. Throughout her career, she lived and served as a pilot in locations such as Okinawa, Japan; Kansas – where she met her husband, who was also a pilot in the Air Force – and California, where she and her husband started a family. After leaving the Air Force in 2013, she took some time off to focus on raising her family. A few years later, she put her pilot’s license back to use and went to fly for regional carrier CommutAir in Virginia.

Charlene applied to be a pilot for American, and, in 2017, she began flying for the airline. She is currently based in Washington, D.C., as a First Officer flying Boeing 737 aircraft. She says she frequently gets stopped at airports by children, team members and customers of color, who want to shake her hand in admiration and often tell her they’ve never seen an African American female pilot. She tells people that there’s a lot of other pilots who look like her out there now.

Charlene is fulfilling her dream of being a pilot and encourages young aspiring aviators to do the same every chance she gets.

“There are several African American female pilots who have blazed a trail for aspiring aviators of color,” she said. “There were many before me, and now it’s time for future pilots to come widen that trail to make sure there are many more after me. If there are roadblocks along the way, I encourage future pilots to knock them down, and don’t give up. Not everyone’s journey to become a pilot will be the same, but as long as they continue taking that next step on the path to reaching their goals, they’ll eventually find their way to the flight deck.”

First Officer, Charlene Shortte