ATLANTA BLACK STAR

EXCLUSIVE NEWS

'I Do Have a Talent for Flying': Black Student Pilot Wants to Help Change the Complexion of the Cockpit

By **Kavontae Smalls** | February 8, 2022 Comments (0)

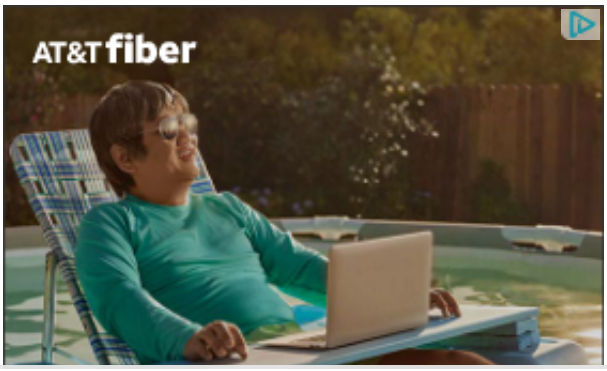
"One day a pilot said to me, 'Why don't you become a pilot?' and it was so farfetched, I was like, 'me?'" Rickiesha Foster, 38, said reflecting on her journey into the cockpit. Foster is among the first group to take part in United Airlines' Aviate program designed to replenish its pilot ranks with more women and people of color.

'I Do Have a Talent for Flying': New Flight Program

"We only saw pilots on TV, and they were always white men, not even women. We didn't see women and definitely not Black women," Foster said.

Foster developed a love for aviation after having worked as a flight attendant for a few years. When she got wind of the new Aviate program that's aimed at recruiting women and people of color to become trained pilots, she jumped on the opportunity.

"My first discover flight, I fell in love with it, and I realized, I do have a talent for flying and I would not have discovered that if I let fear and doubt and everything else stop me from taking that flight," Foster said.



"Right now, a snapshot, 10,000 applicants of that number, two classes have started, and we have 80 individuals, so we pick the best and the brightest from that talent pool," said Carole Hopson, United Airlines training pilot and first officer.

Hopson has been a pilot for 20 years and currently flies the Boeing 737 aircraft. She says the Aviate program is United's way of addressing the looming pilot shortage and breaking down barriers that have kept many women and people of color from earning a pilot's license.

Some 93 percent of pilots flying are white men, less than 6 percent of pilots and flight engineers are women, and only 10 percent are African-American, Asian, Hispanic or Latino according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The median salary for airline and commercial pilots is around $130,440 a year. Average cost to earn a commercial pilot's license in the U.S. is around $100,000, effectively eliminating the opportunity to fly for some underserved communities.

In the past, the military has served as a pipeline to replenish retiring pilots, but United CEO Scott Kirby told Axios, "The military produces far fewer pilots today than they did in the Vietnam and the Cold War era, and it's hard to become a pilot if you're not going through the military."

When pilots reach 65 years old they must retire, meaning many senior pilots today are aging out. The military is also facing a shortage of pilots and attributes the shortage to fewer flight simulator instructors, which causes a ripple effect throughout the typical process of training pilots according to Stephen Losey of military.com.

"The very first certificate is the hardest one to earn because it's the biggest step, and that's what United pays for, then the next piece of that, we make the cost affordable," Hopson said.

"There's so many barriers and obstacles to this career," Foster said, adding to why she found the Aviate program a clear and accessible pathway to earning her pilot's license.

The aviate program reduces a chunk of the costs associated with earning a license and offers $2.4 million dollars in scholarships to help students who otherwise don't have financial means.

Eighty percent of students in the program are women or people of color, and they rack up

The program takes nearly a year to complete, Foster is just beginning to spend time studying in the classroom and flying the Cirrus SR-20 single-engine airplane. "The most difficult part is learning something new, everything new," Foster said of the program experience so far.

Foster, a mother of two, says she cannot wait until she gets to arrive at the gate and greet and inspire young Black girls and boys that they too can take hold of their dreams like she did of becoming a pilot if they put their heart and minds to it.

"I get to be not only a lady pilot, team girl, and someone they can look up to, but for a Black girl who says, Black women are not pilots, wrong, check it," Foster said.

United Airlines plans to hire at least 10,000 pilots within the next eight years, and nearly half of those new hires are expected to come from the Aviate program. For more on the Aviate program and how to apply, visit the Aviate website.

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