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United rolls out ambitious new plan to train at least 2,500 women and people of color as pilots by 2030

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United Airlines is announcing a new plan to train 5,000 pilots by 2030, CBS News' Errol Barnett reports. The airline, which is the only major one in the U.S. to own a flight school, says at least half of those trainees will be women or people of color.

Across the American airline industry, less than 6% of all pilots and flight engineers are women. Only about 10% of them are Black, Asian, Hispanic or Latino Americans.

Just 7% of United Airlines' pilots are women, which it says is one of the highest percentages in the industry. People of color make up only 13% of their pilots.

According to United CEO Scott Kirby, "they simply don't have the access or the opportunity."

Kirby told CBS News about the new effort to bring balance to the flight deck.

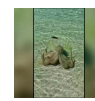
"We're excited at United to be announcing the United Aviate Academy to address the structural issues with the makeup of our pilots," he said.

The academy will have a focus on enrolling underrepresented groups, and will allow potential trainees to apply for both partial and full scholarships.

That means for people like Texas resident Tahchiona Smith, who discovered her love of aviation two decades ago, the dream of becoming a pilot is all the more real.

"My grandmother would take my sisters and I to the airport to watch the airplanes take off and land," the 24-year-old said.

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She recalled smelling the jet fuel by the runway during those trips.

"I still love that smell today," she laughed.

Smith is on a quest to become a commercial airline pilot — normally an expensive ambition.

Flight training costs an average of \$100,000. Over the years, Smith earned scholarships through nonprofit organizations.

She clearly remembers the first time an instructor handed her the controls.

"Once I started turning left and right, I was like, 'This is what I'm gonna do.'" Smith said.

The young adult is following the flight path of people like Mary Ann Schaffer, a 32-year veteran in the industry, and also United Airlines' chief pilot.

"I believe it's related to just the thrill of taking off and controlling the airplane and landing," Schaffer said. "It really is just a feeling of empowerment."

But both Smith and Schaffer say they would like to see more female representation in the cockpit.

Kirby agrees.

"If you want to be a pilot, you either need to be in the military and get pilot training, or you've got to have the resources," the United CEO said. "What we're really doing is opening ourselves up to a huge pool of untapped talent... and give them opportunities to create those kind of wonderful careers."

Smith, a program applicant, recently toured the flight deck of a 737-800 plane with Captain Schaffer.

"I'm so enthusiastic when I see young people coming into the business and sharing some of the love of flying that I've had all along the way," Schaffer said.

That enthusiasm goes both ways for Smith.

"When I see other female pilots like Captain Schaffer, it makes me excited because it allows me to know and see that, you know, one day I can become a professional pilot," she said.

Smith also wants to make sure younger women see her as an example of what's possible.

"Stay dedicated," she said. "No matter how many no's you get, there's always that one yes."

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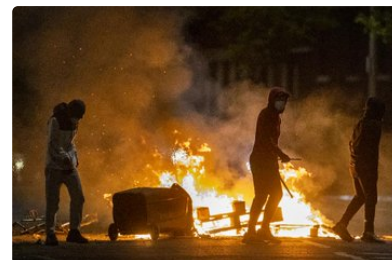
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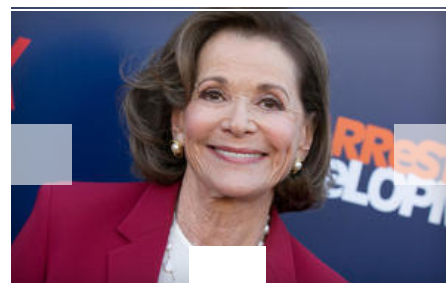
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