

Brothers of the Wind

Historic African-American student organization helped propel one alumnus to career success



Appearing with the Brothers of the Wind in 1983 is Dr. James Plinton, a Tuskegee Airman and a vice president of Eastern Airlines at the time. Plinton, front row, second from the right, was the first African-American Board of Trustees member at Embry-Riddle. He was an instrumental resource for the Brothers of the Wind, often organizing participation and support from industry leaders and university administration. Also pictured is John Paul Riddle, front center.

Dennis Henderson's ('84, DB) dream to fly, while not so different from any other typical student's, came with a special challenge: He was among a small but growing number of African-American students pursuing that dream in the early '80s. While he was not surprised to be in the minority, he was thankful to find out he was not alone.

"There weren't a lot of black students trying to do what I was doing," recalls Henderson, who was one of only about 200 African-American students at Embry-Riddle at the time. "To help make the transition of integration easier, many students like me became involved with Brothers of the Wind."

Brothers of the Wind was an African-American student organization established in 1974 to promote aviation in the minority community. Initially created as a collaborative effort with the Veterans Association, the organization existed as mostly a social and community service-oriented group. Among their many activities, members volunteered with kids in Embry-Riddle's

"Upward Bound" summer program, tutored in the community, and conducted outreach in local churches.

For Henderson, it was a time to enjoy the camaraderie of other African-American students and obtain valuable leadership skills, including a stint as president in 1984. "It was a lot of work to lead [Brothers of the Wind], but it was an experience I wouldn't trade for anything. It taught me a lot about developing projects and working with people—skills that I've used throughout my career."

Those life and career skills paid off in a big way. Since 1989, Henderson has been flying for United Airlines and today is a captain on the B-767. Looking back, Henderson credits the Brothers of the Wind—and the larger brotherhood of aviation students—for keeping him focused on the prize.

"Because we all had a common interest in aviation and race really wasn't an issue on campus, I was unaware about how the odds were against me in the industry," he says. "Had I known how limited the opportunities were back then for me, I might not have stayed the course and worked as hard as I did to graduate and succeed."

SHARING BROTHERS OF THE WIND MEMORIES

The Embry-Riddle Archives has an online database at www.erau.edu/archives featuring thousands of historic photographs from all aspects of the university's past. If you have photos or memorabilia from your involvement with Brothers of the Wind, or if you'd like to share your stories and memories with us, please contact Robert Rockett, dean of the Heritage Project, at **386-226-6026** or e-mail WingsofLegacy@erau.edu.

If you'd like to reconnect with members and friends of Brothers of the Wind, visit the alumni online community at www.ERAUalumni.org/BrothersoftheWind.

By Marci Stappung and Ashlee (Fiser) Ilg ('03, DB)