

Pivoting to Aviation:

If you had asked me what I wanted to do as a career during my freshman or sophomore year of high school, I probably would have said, "Architectural drafting." Growing up around contracting and handyman work—my dad worked as a general contractor—it seemed like a logical path. I figured I could design the plans instead of working outside in the weather to build them.

During my sophomore and junior years, I attended the county's vocational school and earned my AutoCAD certificate. I enjoyed the drafting work, but I wasn't entirely sure it was my passion. That uncertainty left me searching for another direction, without a clear idea of what it might be.

Everything changed the summer after my junior year. It began with a flight at my hometown airport, luka Airport (15M), with a man named Reggie. That initial experience planted a seed: *This is something I really enjoy.*



The following summer, my dad met a flight instructor named Jason Evans at the Northwest Alabama Regional Airport (MSL). One day, Jason offered me the chance to take a discovery flight. I jumped

at the opportunity—beyond excited to experience flying again. That day, I flew in a Cessna 152. After the discovery flight, something clicked. I told myself, *I could do this for the rest of my life.* Flying felt both exhilarating and attainable. It just felt meant to be.

I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I was determined to turn this newfound passion into a career. By my fifth lesson, I made a decision: I took all the money I had saved during high school—around \$6,000—and invested it in my Private Pilot License (PPL). Instead of buying a motorcycle, like many 17-year-old boys might, I chose to buy flight lessons. Nine months later, shortly after graduating from high school, I earned my PPL.



Wanting to learn more about the industry I hoped to work in, I took my first aviation job at Boutique Air, a Part 135 carrier, working as a Cross-Utilized Agent. Around the same time, I enrolled at Northeast Mississippi Community College. It was more affordable, and I was still figuring out the next steps in my aviation journey.



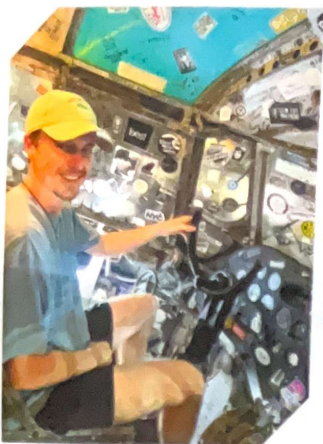
As a first-generation college student, both aviation and higher education were uncharted territory. I began researching universities that could help me access loans, scholarships, and grants. I applied to three and ultimately chose the University of Memphis, mainly for its proximity to home.

Once I settled in, I noticed something important was missing: there was no aviation community. If you've been in aviation for any amount of time, you know how crucial that sense of community is—especially when you're working through your IFR, CPL, multi-engine, and CFI ratings. There were no clubs, no networking events, and no way for aviation students to connect.

Fortunately, I met another student who felt the same way. Brandon Carroll—coincidentally from my hometown of Pickwick, Tennessee—was someone I met in our *Systems One* class, taught by the late Sr. Ron Riley. Together, we co-founded the Memphis Student Aviation Association (MSAA) to create a space where students could share their passion for aviation, build relationships, and support each other's goals.

Founding MSAA was just the beginning. Over the years, the organization has grown, hosting events like aviation career days, resume workshops, and ATC tower tours. One of our signature events is the annual Fly-In and Student Aviation Career Day, which brings together students, professionals, and aviation companies. This event has become a cornerstone for networking and inspiring future aviators, providing a platform for high school and college students to explore career opportunities and connect with industry leaders.

A FIRST-GENERATION PILOT'S STORY



I also had the opportunity to intern with the University Aviation Association (UAA), where I gained valuable insights into aviation education and professional networking.

Today, as an independent Certified Flight Instructor Instrument, I'm proud to train the next generation

of pilots out of KCRX (Corinth) and KSNH (Savannah) with East Aviation. Working in the region where aviation careers weren't always on the radar, I'm helping make those opportunities more visible and attainable for others back in my hometown.

Looking back, my journey was anything but linear. It started with drafting plans and led to flying planes. The hurdles I faced—from self-doubt to financial challenges—taught me resilience. My passion for

aviation, combined with a supportive community, kept me moving forward.

Now, as I help others reach their goals, I'm excited to see what the future holds—for them and for me.

To any young person considering aviation: geography is no barrier. Stay determined, and don't let self-doubt hold you back. I truly believe that with enough hard work, anything is possible. One thing I'm proud to say is that I've always done my best.

Lastly, I'll share a piece of advice from *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz: "Be impeccable with your word."

Use your life and your words to uplift others. You never know where the journey might take you—and I love to travel, so that's a good thing. ✈️



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