

First Officer David Charlebois fought for recognition, helped change company culture

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Growing up in cities steeped in history and culture gave First Officer David Charlebois a thirst for travel and adventure at a young age. Taking regular flights back and forth between Washington, D.C., Paris and Casablanca sparked David's passion for aviation and interest in becoming an airline pilot, according to his partner, Tom Hay.

A passion to fly, to explore — on the flight deck was truly where David wanted to be.

And that's where he was on Sept. 11, 2001. David was the First Officer operating American Airlines Flight 77. He was one of 59 passengers and crew members on board the flight. And he was one of 2,977 people who were killed during the terrorist attacks that day.

Tom met David, the love of his life, in 1988 when they were both in their early 20s. At the time, there was a heightened stigma toward the LGBTQ community in many professions, including airline pilots. Tom chooses to remember all that he gained from his time with David, rather than what he lost.

In 1990, the National Gay Pilots Association (NGPA) was formed with a mission to help counter injustice, advance civil rights and foster diversity, equity and inclusion in the aviation industry. By having tough conversations, and through empathy and action, the association began advancing recognition of LGBTQ pilots and their causes.

David was an early member of the NGPA. His contribution helped ensure ongoing progress toward fairness and equality.

"The solidarity the NGPA and so many of its members fostered, transcended into the relationship David and I

shared," Tom said. "Joining together with other members of the NGPA in civil rights campaigns, such as the March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, was empowering. Together, we knew we were bringing about change in some small way."

Tom said that it was through the association and its members that the two began to feel more confident about their identities, relationship and building a life together in Washington, D.C.

American Airlines Capt. Michael Walker was a close friend of David and Tom's and participated in many events with the couple. Michael said he remembers the turning point during one of the March on Washington events.

"While gathering at the start of one of the rallies, I remember there being a question among crew members about whether American would allow us to march in uniform," Michael said. "I will never forget the moment we were given the green light to represent the American brand. That moment, when we knew American had our backs as we fought for inclusion and equality, was a real turning point and one that I can vividly remember David feeling very proud to be a part of."

This year, the NGPA will award a flight training scholarship in honor of David and his pursuit for justice. Granted on an exceptional basis, the scholarship will be awarded to an applicant who demonstrates a very high level of service and leadership.

"Throughout his career with American, David exemplified the very essence of what it means to care for our customers and team members," Capt. Chip Long, Vice President of Flight Operations said. "We're incredibly proud to see his legacy live on and continue to have a positive influence on our industry and the communities we serve."

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