

The path less traveled

3/1/2021

Each month, American Way features an article written from the perspective of an American Airlines team member — a unique way to connect the airline's customers with the people who care for them on life's journey. In the March issue, Stephanie Bixel shares how she unexpectedly found a career in simulator engineering.

Growing up, I didn't have a love of airplanes or using tools. In fact, I dreamed of being a marine biologist. While the ocean fascinated me, I knew the traditional college experience wasn't going to be an option with a single mom who worked two jobs just to get by. As I was considering my future, my mom encouraged me to keep dreaming big and open my mind to nontraditional career paths.

So, my senior year of high school, I met with a U.S. Air Force recruiter. We discussed aviation technology careers — and something clicked for me. My Air Force entrance test scores then matched me to a job in electronic warfare systems, a rare training program for women. You could say that my career in avionics quite literally chose me.

I re-entered the civilian workforce four years later as the first female avionics technician ever hired by one of the largest regional airlines in America. I spent the next seven years learning the intricacies of the flight deck flight instrument systems and aircraft wiring. Then, in 1997, my husband and I left the northwest for the Texas sun and its booming aviation industry.

And I'm glad we did. Because soon enough, I was building flight simulators for a helicopter company before finding my dream job as a flight simulator engineer at American.

More than 21 years have passed and I still love working on these amazing high-tech machines. Every day is challenging and unique. I tap into different skill sets, from flying to coding, and solving puzzles for a living, while making sure the state-of-the-art simulators that help train our pilots are in the best shape possible. The work we

do, largely behind the scenes and in the middle of the night, is incredibly important and endlessly rewarding. I'm so honored to be part of such an incredibly talented and resourceful team.

When I look back at the advice my mom gave me so many years ago, I know she was right. Like so many, my path has had its challenges, but it's taken me where I'm meant to be.

Stephanie Bixel

Flight Simulator Development Engineer, DFW

Caption