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From Pushing Carts at Kmart To Flying With United Airlines: Pilot Sheldon Martin Lands Flight 1529 at Cyril E. Airport

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United Airlines Pilot and St. Thomas Native Sheldon Martin was feted during his hero's welcome event at the Cyril E. King Airport on Wed. Nov. 30, 2022. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

When United Airlines Pilot Sheldon Martin deboarded the aircraft that he had just piloted to the Cyril E. King Airport along with Captain Jeffery Gibson on Wednesday, he looked polished in his uniform, seemingly unburdened by the pressures of dozens awaiting his arrival in person and thousands more online.

But his path to success was anything but glossy.

The 30-year-old St. Thomas native, whose flight had 126 passengers aboard, was feted as he made his way from the aircraft to a small conference room at the airport, stopping several times before entering the room — from the mobile passenger boarding stairs, on the tarmac and later as he entered the airport facility. The elation was visible on his face as family members, including Mr. Martin's father and sister, embraced him, they too with delight on their countenances.

The flight, which was scheduled to land at about 12:05 p.m. Wednesday, instead landed just past 11:30 a.m. which gave the pilots and their crew enough time to participate in the hero's welcome home organized by the V.I. Port Authority and its lauded executive director, Carlton Dowe.

Once in the room, Mr. Martin exuded humility and a willingness to do his part in helping the territory's youth overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams. He spoke of coming home to St. Thomas during the summertime and volunteering. The pilot also offered himself to speak to youth around the territory.



Mr. Martin has about 15 years of experience in aviation, though he secured his license some 7 years ago. A friend who Mr. Martin said was his first passenger upon securing his license was present at today's hero's welcome. "The ink wasn't even dry yet," Mr. Martin said, referring to his aviation license, and the two flew to Puerto Rico together.

But the path to this success story was a difficult one which Mr. Martin was sure to convey. He recalled his days pushing shopping carts for customers at Kmart in St. Thomas, and moving to Antigua for a while before returning home to St. Thomas. Upon his return, Mr. Martin continued his education online and he took some courses at the Raphael O. Wheatley Skill Center because he wanted to learn a trade. The pilot spoke of making \$300 and every two weeks using \$150 for flight training. Even when Mr. Martin was ready to get his aviation license, it took longer because of the lack of funds. "Things were kind of rough so it took a while for me to get my license because my strategy was pay as you go," he said.

Mr. Martin, who is married and recently welcomed a newborn, sought to encourage young Virgin Islanders who may be discouraged after suffering setbacks. "Never give up," he said. "Always remember what the end goal is and reach for the goal. Never give up. There's going to be times of tribulation but you never give up, that's the key. It wasn't an easy process getting here. It took me couple years to get my license compared to people who have the money; they get it quicker. It took me a while but I wouldn't give up the path I took."

The event was significant enough that United Airlines General Manager in Puerto Rico, Orlando J. Cordova traveled to St. Thomas to be part of it. During a short speech, he praised Mr. Martin for his successes and encouraged him to continue striving for the top.

Also present were local senators, including Senators Novelle Francis and Marvin Blyden.

Alani Henneman-Todman, assistant commissioner of marketing at the V.I. Department of Tourism, shared remarks about the importance of such successes and their potential impact on travel to the territory. "It's the best kind of promotion because it's homegrown, it's authentic, it's what visitors want to see, and these kinds of stories inspire people to say, 'oh, let's go to the U.S. Virgin Islands, look how the people support their people. And if you know anything about the tourism industry, it's all about the people and connections."

Mr. Dowe, the V.I. Port Authority executive whose ability to move matters forward made today's and last Friday's events possible, spoke of the impact on the territory's youth when they witness such successes. He said his phone has been ringing nonstop with parents calling to share how the events have positively impacted their children. Mr. Dowe has been working with lawmakers such as Mr. Francis to secure funding so that the territory's youth could attend aviation school locally.

The videos of American Airlines Pilot Adrian Tutein, a St. Croix native, published by [the V.I. Consortium](#) and [the V.I. Port Authority](#), have gone viral, garnering 1.36 million views combined. This led not only American Airlines but United Airlines to take notice. There's even talk that Delta Airlines is looking for a USVI pilot among its ranks, if only to get some of the attention, according to Mr. Dowe, a comment that led to some laughter in the room.