Reach for the sky

Back in 1505, Italian genius Leonardo da Vinci wrote: “Once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.” Flying remains a fascination and today in Hong Kong, former pilot Nigel Leung is helping many to achieve their dream.
The sky’s the limit for those with passion

A boy who grew up in a Tsu Wan Shan public housing estate has fulfilled his childhood dream. Now he is encouraging others to be brave and follow in his pioneering footsteps.

Nigel Leung was a pilot for Dragonair for about 10 years. In 2009 he started offering courses on aviation to teenagers. "I am always impressed with the different city views I see whenever I fly," Leung says, "but I want to let more people experience what I tasted as a pilot."

He is using his knowledge to help young people gain admission to cockpit pilot programmes run by international airlines. "I did not have a clear guidance when I first applied for the programmes, but I hope that under my tutelage teenagers will be on the right track."

From housing estate to the sky

Why were you interested in becoming a pilot?

To be honest, it wasn’t just about being a pilot. With excellent results in physics and mathematics, I went for aeronautical engineering which sounded quite exciting. While at university, I gradually developed a real understanding and interest in the aviation industry. Flying was my childhood dream. To be more exact, I had a liking for airports. I always thought of them as places where we embark on a journey to chase our dream and where we return home after achieving it.

With such a strong academic background, has it always been plain sailing for you?

I did not come from a well-off family. We lived in a public housing estate. When I was 10 years old, I was fortunate to win a scholarship to continue my studies in Singapore (Cityhall) and then London (Keele). But I realised that what I had learned in school was actually not required in society. There was a different set of rules in society. When I first applied to be a cockpit pilot I failed because I did not have the skills that were needed. I realised that my "head bus" was empty.

So how did you finally become a pilot?

I didn’t give up and I was willing to change. It is easier to fail but we have to learn from our mistakes. I used my savings to get hands-on flight experience in Australia before reapplying for the programme.

What you require to succeed

Do teenagers need a strong academic background to become pilots?

Learning to "ASK" does not only mean asking the right question. It also means “Attitude”, “Skills and Knowledge”. What is most crucial is attitude. The most important thing is to be mature because you are responsible for the 300 passengers on your aircraft.

What should we do if we face setbacks?

My dad told me not to dream about being a pilot when I was graduated as there were not so many job opportunities in Hong Kong in 2001. It was not easy to get a job. But I kept telling myself that I should believe in myself and I persuaded my dad to let me try. Later when I had plans to start a school, he again objected, saying it was impractical. But he now very glad of my achievements.

Can you give our young readers some advice?

Set and accomplish goals for yourself, not for your parents or others. It is okay to be not so talented or skillful, what you need is passion and determination.

Nigel Leung’s profile

• Academic background: Graduated from Imperial College, London with first-class honours in aeronautical engineering.
• Aviation qualifications: Pilot with 5,000 actual flight hours.
• Current status: Founder of Aero Institute and host of aviation shows on RTHK.

Stay tuned with the air crew

LEUNG can be heard on RTHK talking about the aviation industry. He is joined on the show by people connected with flying such as flight attendants, air traffic controllers and aircraft engineers. The weekly programme "In Free Flight" is part of the station’s Community Involvement Broadcasting Service (CBS). CBS is a platform for the community to participate in broadcasting. Successful applicants have to host 12 episodes of the show.