

Brave Bessie

The air show was about to begin. A crowd lined up to see the barnstormers, pilots who did daring tricks and aerobatic stunts for entertainment. But the main act refused to perform.

It was 1925 in Texas. Black people and white people were segregated. They had to enter the air show through different gates. Bessie Coleman did not think this rule was fair. She would not fly her plane until everyone was treated equally and allowed to enter through the same gate.

Bessie stood up for what she believed and won. The audience came through one gate, and Bessie boarded her plane. Up above, the plane flew loop-the-loops. Down below, the crowd cheered. “Queen Bess! Brave Bessie!”

Bessie Coleman was born in Texas in 1892. Her father was part Cherokee. Her mother was an African American daughter of enslaved parents. The family picked cotton and washed other people’s laundry to earn money. The story goes that Bessie was working in the fields one day when she saw a plane. From that day on, she wanted to fly.

Bessie went to school in a one-room schoolhouse. She was good at math. She saved enough money to go to college for a short time. When the money ran out, she moved to Chicago to be with her older brothers.

One of those brothers told her about the women pilots he met in France when he was serving in the military during World War I. He didn't think she could do what those women were doing. She decided to prove him wrong.

Bessie worked in a barbershop to earn money for flight school. But American flight schools would not allow Black women to become pilots. So Bessie went to France. She earned her pilot's license in 1921.

Bessie returned to the United States with a dream. She wanted to open her own flight school for African American women. To work towards that goal, she became a barnstormer. She spoke and performed all over the country. Audiences were amazed by her bravery and perseverance.

In 1926, Bessie was performing in an air show when a loose wrench got caught in the plane's engine. She was not wearing a seatbelt. Airplanes at that time had no roof and little protection. She fell to her death at the age of 34.

Although she did not live long enough to open her school, Coleman inspired others to carry on her dream. In 1929, African American pilot William J. Powell started the Bessie Coleman Aero Club in her honor. The club welcomed anyone, including Black women.

Bessie's legacy lives on today. In 2020, Captain Remoshay Nelson became the first African American woman to join the United States Air Force aerobatics team, the Thunderbirds. "If you continue to work hard and go after



what it is you want, you will achieve your dream," Captain Nelson said. Bessie would agree.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Why did Bessie refuse to fly at first in the 1925 Texas air show?
 - a. Because Black people and white people were segregated
 - b. Because it was too dangerous
 - c. Because she wasn't wearing a seat belt
 - d. Because women weren't allowed to fly

2. Why did Bessie go to France?
 - a. Because her brother met women pilots in France
 - b. Because she didn't have enough money to go to school in America
 - c. Because American flight schools would not allow women
 - d. Because American flight schools would not allow Black people

3. Bessie's response to her brother shows you that she was:
 - a. Timid
 - b. Determined
 - c. Obedient
 - d. Reckless

4. How do you think Bessie would *most likely* feel about the Bessie Coleman Aero Club?
 - a. Proud that it was named after her
 - b. Unhappy that she didn't create it
 - c. Worried that it would not survive
 - d. Proud that it welcomed Black women

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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