

Bessie Coleman

January 26, 1892 – April 30, 1926

Risk-taking



“I refused to take no for an answer.” Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman was the first African American and Native American descendent to earn her pilot's license in the United States. She is known for wowing crowds with her aerobatic stunts. She spoke to groups in churches, schools and other venues in order to earn money for her own plane and open her own flight school. Coleman would only speak in venues open to everyone without segregation. She was recognized for standing up for her beliefs as well as stunt flying. Coleman's use of the **soft skill of risk-taking** enabled her to meet her ambitious goals.

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas to an African American mother, who worked as a maid and a father of mixed Native American and African American decent, who worked as a sharecropper. Due to discrimination, her father left the family and moved away in an attempt to escape the fallout of racism. This left her mother and her 12 siblings to work together in the fields, and wash laundry to earn extra money.

When Bessie was 18, she had only saved enough money for one semester of school at the *Colored Agricultural and Normal University* (Langston University, today) in Langston, Oklahoma. She was forced to drop out after that semester because she could not afford the tuition.

When she was 23, Coleman moved to Chicago with her brothers and became a manicurist in a barbershop after studying at the *Burnham School of Beauty Culture*. Her brothers served in World War I and shared stories with her about France. Apparently, her brothers teased her about French women being able to fly airplanes. Coleman was inspired and driven to become a pilot and applied to many flight schools in the United States. She was declined at all of them because she was African American and a woman. So, she took French lessons, and learned enough to be able to apply to the French schools. She was accepted at the *Coudron Brothers' School of Aviation* in Le Crotoy, France, and received her international pilot's license from the *Federation Aeronautique Internationale* before returning to the United States.

In 1926 at the young age of 34, a serious accident would be her last. She and the pilot for that flight were both killed. Later, it was discovered that the accident was caused by a loose wrench becoming caught in the engine. The famous activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett gave the eulogy at her funeral and many people across the globe were heartbroken over her death.

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What are you willing to risk to meet your goals at SSU in preparation for your future?