

Nia I. Gilliam

Biography

As one of the few Black female airline pilots in the United States, Nia I. Gilliam's journey from being a wide-eyed ten-year-old with big dreams to flying the Boeing 777 on international routes, and becoming an Airbus Captain for a major US airline, is a tale of profound resilience. After graduating from Southern Illinois University Carbondale with a bachelor's degree in aviation management and flight, she became a certified flight instructor, then a traffic patrol pilot, where she flew radio personalities who reported the traffic conditions on the ground, and finally a commercial pilot. She now holds the position of Airline Transport Pilot and has earned aircraft type ratings in the B737, B757/767, B777, B787, and Airbus.

The event that threatened to bring down her successful career was September 11, 2001, when she was eyewitness to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers from her position on the flight deck, on the runway at Newark Airport. This pivotal experience is at the heart of her debut memoir, *Cleared for Takeoff*.

Gilliam's story also extends beyond the flight deck. In 2016, she co-founded Sisters of the Skies Inc., a 501c3 nonprofit organization with a mission to increase the number of Black female pilots through scholarship, mentorship, and outreach. This organization allowed her to turn her passion into an opportunity for other Black women in aviation. In 2023, Sisters of the Skies was the recipient of the Henderson Trophy, a distinguished award presented by the National Aeronautic Association and displayed at the National Air and Space Museum. Sisters of the Skies has also received notable press from *Good Morning America*, *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, *Bloomberg*, and more.

Along with Sisters of the Skies, Gilliam has also independently garnered significant recognition for her impact in the skies and on the ground. She has been honored with several prestigious awards, including the Egretta Award for extraordinary African American women, the Council of Urban Professionals Industry Innovator Award, the United Airlines BEACON Excellence Award for Community Service, the Wells International Foundation Spirit of Equality Award, and the Tradition of Excellence Award from her high school alma mater, Oak Park and River Forest, which she shares with Ernest Hemingway. Her story has captured the attention of major media outlets such as CBS News, the *Essence* Disruptors Series, and *Marie Claire Magazine*. She was the cover story for the *SIUC Alumni Magazine* and selected as an honoree by *Women Leading Travel & Hospitality* for its 2024 Top Women Report, but her most notable appearance was on *PBS American Masters: The Women's List*, where she was featured alongside Shonda Rhimes, Madeline Albright, Margaret Cho, and other remarkable trailblazers.

In her personal life, Gilliam has faced challenges as compelling as those in her professional journey. As a breast cancer survivor, she has learned the true meaning of strength and resilience, and she has become a dedicated advocate for health and wellness among women.

Gilliam is a Chicago native turned Houstonian, having lived in Houston, Texas for the last eighteen years. She is a proud mother of a twenty-three-year-old corporate pilot son who followed in her aviation footsteps, a fifteen-year-old daughter who loves to travel but is not interested in becoming a pilot, and a cherished five-year-old Maltipoo.

