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Brian Smith

Pilot and explorer Barrington Irving is helping kids learn from his globe-trotting travels.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no," says Barrington Irving, recalling the word he heard so many times when he set out six years ago, at the age of 23, to become the youngest person at the time — and the only African-American — ever to fly solo around the world. Pilots thought he lacked the flight experience to complete the trip. Aircraft manufacturers wouldn't loan him a plane or parts. And numerous potential financial backers refused to fund the sky-high dreams of a Jamaica-born young man who grew up in inner-city Miami, became a star fullback, then rejected a football scholarship at the University of Florida so he could pursue a career as a pilot.

"I just kept getting the same answer," Irving says now. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no," they said. But I had an athlete's mentality about it all. I knew I could do it. I wanted to defeat everyone who said, 'no.' I wanted to win with my brain."

He did win. In 2007, flying a single-engine Cessna 400 for 97 days, Irving traveled 30,000 miles, traversing sandstorms in Saudi Arabia, monsoons in India and ice storms in the North Pacific, none of which he had seen before.

"Except for being born in Jamaica, I'd never even been out of Miami," Irving says. "But aviation taught me there was a whole world out there."

That's the lesson Irving, now 29, wants to get into the brains of kids. Next fall, Irving will pilot a nine-seat jet on another around-the-globe flight that could make him the youngest person and only African-American to fly to all seven continents in a single trip. The journey is about more than another record: It's about connecting thousands of kids to that "world out there." Called Classroom in the Sky, Irving's four-month trip will take him to dozens of spots around the world: Cuzco, Peru; Rome; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. And, if he times the weather just right, Antarctica.

From the air, Irving will chat and share pictures and videos of his travels with kids from around the world. Any child with access to the Internet or to the mobile apps Irving's team is developing can follow along. From the ground, school groups and individuals can use those same apps and Irving's website to help with things like flight navigation, fuel calculations and weather forecasts, competing to see who can be the most accurate. Students will also determine Irving's itinerary on ground expeditions.

This didn't have to be it, though, for Irving. After he became the youngest person to fly solo around the globe (getting edged out last September by a Swiss 22-year-old named Carlo Schmid), Irving had job offers from commercial airlines and from celebrities who wanted a famous flier to ferry them around in private jets. A career as a full-time pilot had been his goal ever since the day a Boeing 777 pilot walked



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into the bookstore run by Irving's parents and asked the then-15-year-old Irving if he'd consider flying for a living.

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"I told him I didn't think I was smart enough to be a pilot," Irving says. "But he took me to see the plane he flew and let me press the buttons in the cockpit, and I was hooked. I realized that aviation could be a different way out of the inner city."

Then again, Irving already seemed well on his way out of the inner city. He was a star fullback on Northwest Miami High School's powerhouse football team, which made it to the state championship game during his senior year. And Irving, who ran the 40-yard dash in a blistering 4.3 seconds, had the chance to take his talents away from inner-city Miami to Gainesville, Fla., where the University of Florida offered him a full scholarship. Instead, Irving accepted a U.S. Air Force ROTC scholarship and studied aeronautical science at Florida Memorial University.

"Flying a Cessna was more exhilarating to me than hearing the roar of the crowd at a football game," he says.



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Joseph Guinto

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