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## At 23, the Youngest Pilot to Solo the Planet

By VINCENT M. MALLOZZI

The usual mix of celebrities and wiseguys were mingling at Rao's on Monday night when Sonny Grasso entered with an entourage that included a young black man dressed in a brown flight suit.



You could hear a diamond brooch drop as the entourage made its way to their table amid the fortunate diners who had managed to get a table at Rao's, the East Harlem restaurant legendary for its exclusivity. The men and women in suits and skirts paused, their forks lowered and their eyebrows raised. "Who's that?" asked a man in a silk shirt sitting at a back table beneath an autographed photo of Jerry Lewis. "Where's he from?"

Barrington Irving, 23, on June 27, at Opa-Locka Airport near Miami, after a 97-day solo flight around the world in a single-engine plane. AFP - Getty Images

A few minutes later, Mr. Grasso, one of the two real-life cops depicted in the movie "The French Connection," held a drink high over his head, and asked everyone — including Conan O'Brien, who was seated at a nearby table — to join him in a toast to Barrington Irving, a 23-year-old pilot from Miami Gardens, Fla.

Mr. Irving, a senior majoring in aeronautical science at Florida Memorial University, completed a solo flight around the world in a single-engine plane last month to become the youngest and first black pilot to accomplish that feat.

"My plane had no radar and no de-icing equipment," said Mr. Irving, enjoying a plate filled with chicken and roasted peppers shortly after the

Rao's crowd welcomed him back to earth with a warm ovation. "It was just me up there, alone, flying on gut instinct — pretty much the way [Charles Lindbergh](#) and Amelia Earhart did it."

Sitting in the cockpit of a Columbia 400 he named Inspiration — "because that's what I want to be to younger people," he said — Mr. Irving began his journey on March 23 from Opa-Locka Airport near Miami, and ended there on June 27, 96 days, 150 hours (of flight time) and 26,800 miles later.

The trip, which cost roughly a million dollars, was rejected by more than 50 different sponsors whom Mr. Irving began approaching about two and a half years ago.

"At the time, I had just a little over 600 hours of flight experience," he said. "So people thought I was both too young and too inexperienced."

But eventually, sponsors began accepting and donating money and aircraft parts.

From Florida, Mr. Irving headed to Ohio and Farmingdale, N.Y., and continued to Newfoundland, the Azores, Madrid, Rome, Athens, Cairo, and through sandstorms to get to Dubai.

Mr. Irving, who said he grew lonely and frustrated for long stretches, refueled his plane and his spirits after each landing by communicating with fans over a Web site, [www.experienceaviation.org](http://www.experienceaviation.org).

"People were asking me everything from how I was able to go to the bathroom while flying to what it was like to fly over ancient ruins in Greece and Italy," he said. "Their enthusiasm kept me going."

So he pointed Inspiration's nose toward India, trying to avoid thumping monsoons, which followed the course all the way to Bangkok and Hong Kong.

He reached Japan, where skies began to brighten, then turned for home, dealing with poor visibility and high, shifting winds when crossing the North Pacific en route to Anchorage, Alaska.

“I got nervous because I began to experience turbulence,” he said. “I saw cloud formations I had never seen before.”

He made his way to Seattle, then Denver and Houston, and Mobile, Ala. — where he stopped to meet the engineers who built his TSIO 550, 310-horsepower engine — before flying back to Florida.

When Mr. Irving was done with his main course at Rao’s, he picked at a piece of cheesecake and discussed his place in history.

“It’s humbling, especially in this day and age, when a lot of young black men are getting caught up in the wrong things,” said Mr. Irving, who was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and grew up in Miami. “I feel blessed that I had a chance to maybe inspire kids out there, black or white, to become pilots or engineers or air traffic controllers, or to make a positive impact in any other area of life.”