

Angel Flight fulfills lofty purpose

By JOANNA CARVER
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Richard and Diane Bondurant of St. Simons Island have had some unfortunate luck in recent years with health issues.

Richard Bondurant, 80, has squamous cell sarcoma, or oral cancer, and has needed a number of surgeries in Atlanta. Recently, one of his cousins was afflicted with Parkinson's and was in need of out-of-town treatment, while Diane Bondurant's cousin some years ago had a brain tumor and had to get to Duke University for medical care.

Kinship is not the only thing these three share in common. All got to where they needed to go for treatment courtesy of a non-profit organization called Angel Flight.

Founded in 1983, Angel Flight is a group of pilots who donate their time, gasoline and aircraft to fly people who are in desperate need of medical treatment in another city or state but cannot get to it on their own.

Member pilots have flown approximately 120 people out of McKinnon St. Simons Island Airport and 80 out of Brunswick Golden Isles Airport since 2004, including 16 this year. They also recently coordinated a mission to relocate a Brunswick family suffering from domestic abuse and have transported children to special needs camps.

After Hurricane Katrina hit the northern Gulf Coast in 2005, the Brunswick airport was a hand-off point during missions to help people displaced by storm and flood damage.

Who are these Angels? They're people like Jack Cantrell, a pilot from St. Simons Island and one of nearly 900 Angel Flight pilots in the Georgia region.



Submitted photo

Jack Cantrell, left, is one of nearly 900 Angel Flight pilots in the Georgia area. Richard Bondurant, right, is a patient that Cantrell has flown to Atlanta for cancer surgeries in Atlanta.

As do other pilots, Cantrell seems to remember every flight he has ever made, but working with Angel Flight, that isn't difficult. Since joining in 1994, Cantrell has flown more than 450 people in need of medical treatment to hospitals and doctors all over the country at no charge.

"I told a preacher at a Methodist church that I had a plane that could fit six people, and he says, 'Ever heard of Angel Flights?' I called them, they verified my credentials, and the next week I was flying," Cantrell said.

Cantrell has a stack of photographs of himself with his former passengers, as well as letters from them thanking him and letting him know how they're getting along

now. Many of them are children.

"With all these things pulling on your heart, it makes it hard not to do this," he said.

Driving for people with serious illnesses or injuries can be extremely painful, whereas Angel Flight is faster and more comfortable.

One Angel Flight mission was to help a Panama City, Fla., teen who needed treatment for burns. His family attempted to drive him to a hospital, but after a few hours, he could no longer bear the pain. An Angel pilot was contacted and promptly flew the injured teen to his destination.

Although local Angel Flight pilots mostly fly people to Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and

the Carolinas, there is no limit to where they can go.

Similar organizations exist all over the nation, and the Angel Flight pilots often link up with pilots in other states to get people to medical help.

Angel Flight pilot Mike Pickett, formerly of the U.S. Air Force, is a resident of St. Simons Island and has been with the organization for four years.

He recently attended the funeral of a young girl he had flown to Atlanta for treatment. He admitted that it's hard to balance the joy of saving someone's life with the grief of not being able to.

"We do these things and they are very rewarding," Pickett said. "Not many people can do this."