

Angel Flight helps miracles happen

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By CODY TRAWICK

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The Malibu Meridian Piper airplane taxied down the runway at McKinnon St. Simons Island Airport Tuesday afternoon.

The aircraft's pilot, Jack Cantrell, wasn't the first to exit the craft, however.

That distinction belonged to Malcolm Turner, 3, and his mother, Jessica Turner, both of St. Simons Island.

Malcolm had just successfully completed his fourth Angel Flight, having left Cincinnati Children's Medical Center only hours before.



Jessica Turner and her son Malcolm, 2, go through a goodie bag given to them by Cantrell Properties after returning from Cincinnati on an Angel Flight piloted by Jack Cantrell. (Michael Hall/The Brunswick News)

As he played with his toys sitting on the surface of the runway, his mother explained his extraordinary circumstances.

"Malcolm was born at 26 weeks of gestation – 14 weeks early," she said.

Weighing under two pounds, Malcolm's premature birth resulted in a host of respiratory complications, prompting a journey that, for him and his mother, is far from over.

It is one that has been facilitated, however, through the Angel Flight of Georgia program.

The organization, which provides free air transportation for people who have medical needs that can't be fulfilled in their areas, seeks to ease the costs of living with a debilitating condition or, in the case of the Turners', accommodating a child who is suffering an illness.

Jack Cantrell, owner of Cantrell Properties, a real estate firm on St. Simons Island, is one of several thousand pilots in the organization. He's been a member since 1995.

"I basically felt like I had this airplane that wasn't being used enough," he said. "I was approached by a minister in Marietta who asked me if I had ever heard of Angel Flights. I told him I hadn't."

And so began the first of several hundred flights Cantrell has flown.

His mission? Doing what he can to help families coping with abnormal circumstances.

"It's incredible," he said. "You get to know these people really well. I always tell them that I'm the one who's getting the most out of it."

Jessica Turner might be one to disagree.

"There are so many cost-prohibitive (factors involved) with these trips," she said. "I have a 7-year-old at home, as well, and my husband, Tim, works. There's a lot of stress involved."

There's also a lot of stress avoided, though, thanks to the Angel Flight program.

Turner described the benefits of being able to take a private plane from St. Simons Island all the way to Children's Medical Center in Cincinnati.

"For example, major airlines will charge \$75 each leg of a trip to take something like an (oxygen apparatus) on board," she said. "And discount airlines won't allow it at all.

"For us to receive this kind of help for Malcolm, a medically fragile child, it's truly a gift."

Cantrell had flown the 570 miles from St. Simons Island to Cincinnati earlier in the day Tuesday to pick up Malcolm and his mother.

Within a matter of hours, they were standing on the runway of McKinnon airport near the hangar in which Cantrell keeps his plane.

"It was a very smooth trip," he said. "Very good weather."

Take flight

To learn more about the Angel Flight of Georgia program, go to www.angelflight-ga.org on the Internet.