

On the Wings of Angels

Local youngster gets second chance thanks to volunteer organization

By KELLY C. STEPHENSON
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Squeals of excitement and laughter spilled from the lobby of the Thomaston-Upson Airport Monday afternoon. As the double doors opened, the source, a vibrant five-year-old boy and his sisters, was revealed.

"I'm excited about flying in the plane today," said Ian Caldwell. "The doctors are going to look at my bump."

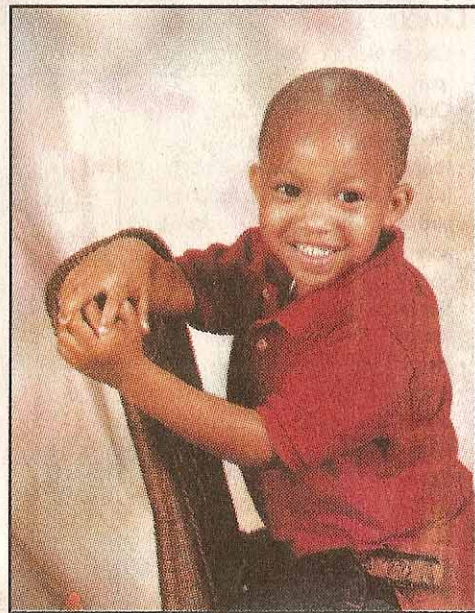
The bump the youngster referred to is Hepatoblastoma, more commonly known as liver cancer. This type of liver cancer usually does not spread outside the liver and usually

affects children younger than three years old. Ian was three when he was diagnosed.

"I noticed a knot in his side at the beginning of January 2006," said Ian's mother, Iesha Caldwell. "I took him to his pediatrician, Dr. Kathy Davis, and she ran a series of tests over the next couple of weeks. She came back to me and suggested we go to Egleston to seek additional treatment."

At the Atlanta children's hospital, doctors were able to assess Ian and deliver the news to the family. Ian was in stage four of the disease. In stage four, cancer is found in all four quadrants of the liver.

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Ian Jamaal Caldwell

ANGELS

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"We were shocked and pretty much in disbelief," said Ian's grandmother, Toni Doaty. "We knew about diabetes and heart disease, but nothing about cancer. There had never been anyone in our family who had been diagnosed. Ian is the first."

Treatment was immediate, says the five-year-old's mother.

"He had a port put in in February," she said. "That's when the chemotherapy began. We traveled to Atlanta every three weeks for treatment."

Although the youngster went into remission in August of 2006, it was less than a year before the cancer showed its ugly head again.

"We thought we had this beat, but here we are again," said the young mother. "The only option was a transplant. He was put on the list on June 28 this year. It was less than two weeks, and they called and said there was a liver."

Although Ian's medical bills are being taken care of, the trip to Pittsburgh, where the transplant is to be done, would be a long one and time was of the essence. A social worker reached out to the mother and told her about a volunteer organization called Angel Flight.

Angel Flight of Georgia is a non-profit volunteer pilot organization located at DeKalb Peachtree Airport in Atlanta.

The mission of Angel Flight of Georgia is to remove the obstacle of transportation for individuals with medical and financial needs.

They accomplish this mission by providing free air transportation to those who need it most. Angel Flight of Georgia serves the community by flying patients to distant medical facilities, delivering supplies to disaster areas and reuniting families during desperate times. This service is made available to any medically stable and ambulatory patient demonstrating a finan-

cia need and/or anyone who cannot utilize or access commercial transportation traveling from, to or through the states of Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, and the Carolinas. It is also available, via coordination with other volunteer pilot organizations in the national Air Care Alliance, across most of the United States.

The organization is the original volunteer pilot organization that has been serving Georgia and surrounding states in the South since 1983. Jim Shafer, a medical industry professional and private pilot, organized Angel Flight of Georgia by recruiting 15 pilot friends to rise and meet the needs of the community. Angel Flight incorporated in Georgia in 1984 and remains an independent local charity today.

Brett K. Meares has been a volunteer pilot with Angel Flight of Georgia (AFGA) since last year and has flown a number of missions already. His mission today was number 1161 for Angel Flight of Georgia this year.

"I do this as a way to give back," said Meares. "My daughter suffered a severe back injury some years ago, and I know what it feels like as parent to have a child who is suffering."

Mears says he mostly flies children to their designated location, but adults frequently travel on the flights as well.

"I'm going to miss playing with my sisters when I'm gone," said the spunky kindergartner.

"We are going to miss him too," said Ian's older sister Jakya. "I think I will miss hugging and kissing him the most and someone to jump on the trampoline with. I can't wait till he gets home."

Ian's mom says the time-frame for Ian's recovery from the surgery is not clear at the time, and a definite date to come home has not been given.

"We are so blessed that there are loving and giving people out in the world like Angel Flight to assist us," she said. "Ian's a strong little man, and he will be back home in the arms of his family before they know it"