

Mobile Healthcare Charities

Wings of Steel, Hearts of Gold



By Joni Strandquest

Stealing sentiment from the French philosopher Voltaire: "It is not known precisely where angels dwell — whether in the air, the void, or the planets."

But it appears that a large majority has north side Atlanta addresses. One could ascertain this is due to the fact that the area is home to Angel Flight of Georgia, an organization providing free transportation to help people whose medical problems necessitate travel for diagnosis or treatment and cannot afford to pay for airfare.

A registered non-profit organization founded in 1990, Angel Flight of Georgia has grown 600 percent since January of 1999. Presently, the charity — which serves the southeastern United States — is on target to make 1,000 flights this year. The angelic feats are accomplished utilizing the combination of eager "Angel" volunteer pilots, a multitude of "Earth Angel" volunteers that coordinate ground efforts, and a full-time staff of three women working out of donated office space within the confines of the DeKalb-Peachtree airport.

Angel Flight



However, the most important focus of Angel Flight's missions is the patients' medical care. Volunteers and staff coordinate the planes and the staff to aid them to their destination — weather permitting.

Meet an Angel

As a disc jockey for WNNX (99X FM), Steve Craig spins tunes and interviews musical guests from Monday through Friday. But during his off time, he sprouts wings and takes flight as one of Angel Flight of Georgia's busiest volunteer pilots.

"I've never jumped headfirst into a non-profit before [Angel Flight]," he reflected. "The issue pulls on my heart strings. And I quickly became attached to the people."

Craig, who flies a Piper Cherokee 180 Challenger out of McCollum airfield, said that he toyed around with the idea of volunteering for Angel Flight while he was training at DeKalb-Peachtree airport to attain his private pilot's license. (A big display case of teddy bears wearing leather jackets — the Angel Flight mascot — caught his eye.)

"A lot of us don't fly commercially ... we just go up [in our planes] and punch holes in the sky," he said. "It's an honor to be a part of this organization. I feel fortunate. And it's nice to [fly to help others] as opposed to just flying for my own reasons."

Patients and Relationships

"Some of the situations are tragic," Craig continued, recollecting some particularly memorable flights including a gentleman sent home with terminal cancer to enjoy his final days, an Atlanta police officer's daughter who was battling leukemia, and a boy with a misshapen head whom Craig spent time with once a week so the boy and his mother could keep a five-minute-long therapists appointment to have the boy's corrective helmet adjusted.

"A lot of people don't have the opportunity, time or resources to be able to fly," he said. "I proudly wear the Angel Flight shirt and pins. I feel very fortunate to be able to return [some of the generosity that people have bestowed on me throughout life]."

"I want people to know that Angel Flight is there for them to use," Craig continued. "Transportation to and from [a medical facility] for treatment can really eat up financial resources. The airlines don't like to give out free tickets. And financially, the pilots receive a tax deduction [around \$600 a mission] for the use of their planes. It's a win-win situation, and is one of the things that makes aircraft ownership really special."

A Parent's Gratitude

"At first I was a little scared," Greer Anderson, a Stone Mountain resident and mother of two, said. "I was afraid of heights, but the first time we went up it was so smooth I didn't even know I was in an airplane."

Anderson's world was shaken when she gave birth prematurely to her first son, Gaston (now 4 years old) at 28 weeks of

pregnancy. After eight months in the hospital, he was unable to hold down milk, and doctors put a feeding tube into him. Instead of coming off the ventilator as expected after surgery, physicians had to perform a tracheotomy to keep Gaston's airway open.

With Gaston experiencing paralyzed vocal cords, an inability to gain weight and numerous gastrointestinal difficulties over a matter of years, Greer, her husband Ernest, and their local physician decided it would be best for Gaston to see Dr. Robin Cotton, an ear, nose and throat specialist with the Children's Hospital Medical Center of Cincinnati in Ohio.

Because Greer's job at Turner Broadcasting was providing the lion's share of family benefits, Ernest had left his job to stay at home and care for their son. Then Greer was laid off. The family had no way to pay for multiple trips to Cincinnati.

Fortunately, an acquaintance told Greer about Angel Flight. Once she contacted them for details, she was especially impressed by the lack of red tape involved in utilizing the service, and the compassion and efficiency of everyone involved. The family has taken almost half a dozen flights via Angel Flight over the past year.

"They're a Godsend to us," Greer said. "Without Angel Flight, we wouldn't have been in a situation for Gaston to receive treatment. They've helped us out more than they can imagine."

Angels on the Ground

In her angel-adorned office, Jeanine Chambers, the executive director of Angel Flight, noted, "We're probably only touching about two percent of the people who really need us."

"We flew people from 25 states and four countries last year," she said. "That's pretty incredible."

FACTS ABOUT ANGEL FLIGHT

After Sept. 11, when planes around the nation were grounded, Angel Flight began transporting search and rescue teams, police officers and fire fighters to aid relief efforts in New York City, beginning the morning of Sept. 12. In addition, they kept the blood supply flowing to hospitals throughout the Southeast. (Hospitals only keep a 48-hour supply on hand).

Angel Flight received written commendations from a multitude of governors and a standing ovation on the Mississippi Senate floor in honor of aiding relief efforts.

2001 STATISTICS

Angel Flight recipients have sought travel for medical care treating 70 different afflictions.

- * 25 percent have cancer
- * 14 percent have a misshapen head
- * 11 percent have mitochondrial disorders
- * 47 percent are under the age of 18 and 31 percent are under the age of 3
- * 5 percent are age 50 and older