

On the wings of an angel

Volunteer pilots fly patients to medical care

By Cheryl Vassiliadis ✽ Photos by Sean McNeil

Just as the sun rises over the clouds along the coastline, Keith Evans and his wife Terri make their final ground checks on their Piper Navaho and prepare for takeoff. Then they're off to Titusville Space Coast Regional Airport to pick up precious cargo to transport to Miami.

As members of Angel Flight Southeast, the area pilots provide free air transportation for people with medical needs who must travel long distances for their health care services when commercial service is not available, impractical or simply not affordable. Their mission today is flying 11-month-old Ashlynn Randall to south Florida where she is scheduled for surgery.

"We'll take it real easy," says Keith Evans, as he reassures Ashlynn's anxious mother.

Ashlynn needs an operation to repair her cleft palate. "She was



born early at 36 weeks and she had trouble breathing and not wanting to feed," says her mother, Brandy Couffer.

Children's Medical Services put her in touch with a physician in Miami, and along with her husband, William Randall, and her 2- and 7-year-old boys, Couffer drove the 250 miles one way to see the specialist and learn about the necessary treatment for her daughter's condition. Along the way, they experienced car trouble and almost didn't make it home. Since

there wasn't a pediatric intensive care unit in Brevard County, Ashlynn needed to travel back to Miami for the operation, which is normally scheduled when a child is 9 months of age.

Because of the difficulty of traveling so far, CMS put the family in touch with the Angel Flight organization. Within three weeks she was notified that her daughter qualified to be a passen-



Volunteer pilots from Volusia and Flagler counties offer their time and planes for medical flights.



Brandy Couffer plays a game of peek-a-boo with her daughter Ashlynn during the flight to Miami.

ger for an Angel Flight mission.

"I was so excited," says Couffer, who had never flown. "Gosh, everything is just so expensive, we just didn't know how we would manage," she adds.

During the 58-minute flight in the eight-seat plane, Ashlynn cooed and smiled as her mom played patty-cake and peek-a-boo to keep her occupied. The pilots checked in every 15 minutes or so with the progress of the flight and to answer any

questions from their passengers.

As the plane gently touched down at Opa Locka Airport, north of Miami, CMS arranged for transportation to a hotel to prepare for Ashlynn's surgery the next morning.

"That landing was great," Couffer says. "I was so worried," she says. "I didn't really know what to expect. It's really neat these people donate their time."


Before storm clouds turn ominous, pilot

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Keith Evans revs up the props and heads homeward, back to his homebase in Flagler County, his mission for today complete.

Because he signs on to volunteer for many of the medical and compassion flights out of Flagler and Volusia counties, Evans bought a larger plane so he could accommodate additional travelers. Palm Coast realtor and fellow pilot Ariel Oren taught Evans to fly a Piper Navajo. Since teaming up, the two pilots have flown several Angel Flight missions to transport patients from Florida to destinations throughout the United States.

"While I am on this planet, I want to touch as many lives as I can," says Evans. "Since my business, EQ Financial, has been successful, I feel blessed we can give back." ✕



Terri Evans takes a snapshot of Brandy Couffer and her daughter Ashlynn at Miami's Opa-Locka Airport.

Jerry Kenney:

'It feels good'

Even though he's been flying for more than 20 years, Port Orange pilot Jerry Kenney says that as a volunteer with Angel Flight Southeast he's been carrying cargo unlike anything he's taken in the past. He's flown cancer patients to treatment centers across the state and supplies into hurricane ravaged areas.

"I picked up a Hispanic family who needed their little boy flown out of state for eye cancer treatments," he says. "They brought along an aunt to interpret for them. That little fellow was so happy to be in that airplane. I don't think any of them had ever been in a plane before."

One of his earliest missions for the organization meant flying through summertime clouds, so to add some atmosphere he played Frank Sinatra's version of "Come Fly With Me." The cancer patient asked how many missions like these he had flown. "I told her this was my first one," he says. "She tried not to look worried, so I quickly assured her that even though this was the first Angel Flight mission I had flown, this was NOT the first flight I had ever taken," he says with a laugh. "I let her know that I had been flying for many, many years."

The pilots who fly for Angel Flight volunteer their time to transport children and adults with medical needs to airports near medical facilities within Florida or other states. Pilots may volunteer to fly their own personal aircraft or rent a plane to carry out a mission. Other volunteers on the ground called Earth Angels schedule and coordinate the missions and raise money to help pay for fuel and other expenses.

Besides providing transportation for those needing medical care, the Angel Flight organization also responds during compelling humanitarian situations. Kenney flew a load of much-needed diapers into Gulf Port, Miss., right after Hurricane Katrina. "When I got there and saw the devastation, it was hard to believe," he says. "Block buildings were blown over. But then I saw people coming from all over the country to help. That really renewed my faith in the human spirit."

Kenney, who runs a visitor's cable TV channel both here and in Pittsburgh, flies a Cessna 172 with upgraded avionics to handle the additional requirements for carrying out missions for Angel Flight.

"This is such a neat organization," he says. "After considering the situations of many of these people, it really puts life in perspective. Unlike just donating money, with this there is a direct link to the people. It feels good to be involved in helping people."

— Cheryl Vassiliadis