

ANGELS IN PALM COAST

BY: GLEN MILLAN



Yolanda Rivera aboard Keith Evan's Piper Navajo, on route to Jacksonville Memorial Hospital

It's 5:30 in the morning. 4 cars drive into an empty parking lot at the Shops at Palm Harbor. Jon and I, representing PC Lifestyles, climb bleary-eyed into the back of Keith Evan's truck, while Ariel Oren takes the front seat next to Keith. Keith has invited us to be part of a mission known as "Angel Flights".

As we drive off, Keith is already on the phone with Flight Services in St. Petersburg. The voice at the other end sounds surprisingly pleased to speak to someone at such an early hour, and apologizes that he does not yet have many live reports on weather conditions over Florida. Nevertheless he gives us a very detailed report on every cloud between Flagler and Miami, our destination for the morning, as best he can from the radar. Except for some storms moving in from the west later, the day promises good flying weather.

At 6 am, we arrive at Ormond Beach Municipal Airport. Keith's twin engine Piper Navajo plane sits quietly on the tarmac in the darkness. Quickly and efficiently, Keith and Ariel perform an inspection of the aircraft while Jon and I buckle ourselves into the 6 passenger cabin. Almost as soon as we take off, we are landing again in Sanford, where the real mission is to begin.

Keith Evans is the owner of EQ Financial, a mortgage brokerage with offices in Palm Coast, St Augustine, Jacksonville, and soon, Orlando. He got his first taste of flying while working for the Cargo division of Eastern Airlines, and would often go on flights as a passenger in the jump seat next to the crew. In 1992, on an impulse, he bought his own first plane, a single engine Beechcraft Sundowner, and began to train for his pilot's license. In 2001 he upgraded to a 4 seat



Keith Evans

Beechcraft Bonanza, which he still co-owns, and then a couple of years ago found the plane he really wanted, the 7 seater Navajo. He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw his own initials in the tail number "123KE".

The four of us walk over to the terminal to meet with the real passengers for the day, Yolanda Rivera of Longwood, and her son Frankie. They are understandably anxious, but give us a warm greeting. We can see Yolanda's smile despite the face mask she wears constantly to guard against unwelcome infections. A former nurse, Yolanda was diagnosed with cancer 3 years ago, and is near the top of a waiting list for a liver transplant at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. Now her doctors are considering a multiple transplant to include her kidneys as well. She has driven to Miami on her own several times, but each time the trip becomes harder for her, both for health and financial reasons. On her last trip, a nurse at Jackson recommended her to contact "Angel Flight Southeast".

Angel Flight Southeast is a non profit group that involves over 1100 private pilots in Florida and 5 other states, together with a network of supporters who help raise funds and provide ground support. The pilots donate their time, fuel, and often the use of their own planes, to help transport people in need, usually to help patients get to distant medical

appointments, but also for other compassionate reasons. Keith still remembers his first Angel Flight. He flew Mary, who had just lost her husband, to visit with her only son who was unable to travel. The Angel Flight central control in Leesburg processes all applications and checks whether they meet the requirements. Passengers



Ariel Oren

must be physically able to fly in a small plane, and demonstrate financial or other need. Once qualified, they are entered in a central database from which volunteer pilots can choose appropriate flights. Despite a long list, Keith assures me that, except in bad weather, it is very rare for a need not to be met.

As we take off from Sanford dawn is breaking, and in a few minutes the first rays of sun light up our cabin. Yolanda gives a little gasp, and I ask if she is alright. "Yes" she says. It turns out that her mother passed away two days ago and she just felt her presence as we rose through the clouds. We talk a little about her mother, who became a successful businesswoman from a simple start in Puerto Rico. Despite the loss, Yolanda is serene and happy rather than sad. We chat with her son Francisco, who is here to look after his mother, but will be leaving to join the Airborne Infantry in a couple of months. Yolanda also has two sisters

who will be able to take care of her.

Approaching Miami, the clouds have rolled in from the west, a bit earlier than predicted, but Ariel expertly negotiates them, barreling along at 180 mph, and lands us gently in a light rain at Tamiami Airport, on the south side of Miami. We bid farewell to Yolanda and Frankie, who catch a cab to the Hospital. Another Angel pilot will pick them up later in the day and take them home. Keith decides we should skip breakfast and leave promptly in case the weather worsens. By 10:30, with Keith at the controls this time, we are back in the sunshine at Ormond, where the plane is based due to a lack of hangar space at Flagler.

I ask how Keith and Ariel teamed up, and Keith tells me he thinks of it as either a unique coincidence or divine intervention. Ariel, a realtor with ReMax Oceanside, had moved to Flagler County a few years ago and had some business dealings with Keith's mortgage business. One day Keith mentioned that he was taking delivery of the new plane, but needed to find someone to help him complete his qualifications on a twin engine, whereupon Ariel disclosed that not only was he a pilot, but also a certified instructor on the Piper Navajo. Keith and Ariel now make at least one Angel Flight each month, viewing it as a simple way of harnessing their passion for flying and turning it to the benefit of the community.

Angel Flight is not just about the pilots, but there is also a large volunteer support network known as "Earth Angels". Giles Ashe, owner of Wings Aviation in Kissimmee, manages the aircraft maintenance for Keith and other pilots and makes sure that all certifications meet the standards required by Angel Flights Southeast, while Nick Frankovich of Flagler Aviation, is a partner with Keith in the single engine Bonanza, which is also used occasionally for shorter missions. Terri Evans, his wife, has been a

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partner on many flights and is completing qualifications to become an Angel Pilot herself.



Julie Mathis, owner of East Coast Premier properties, is an "Earth Angel" and a strong supporter of the Angel Flight organization. A cancer survivor herself, she was told 6 years ago that she had terminal ovarian cancer and would not live. She is still here, happy and healthy, and gives her time freely to help other cancer victims combat the disease. She had already begun to support Angel Flights while Keith was flying in his single engine plane. Then, in another remarkable coincidence, her sister Suzanne met and married Ariel not long before he teamed up with Keith. Now Julie, and her colleagues Mari Parks and Melanie Broyles at East Coast Properties, organize several fundraisers annually to support the administrative

costs of the Angel Flight network. They all hope for more volunteers and more missions out of Flagler Airport once the planned expansion takes place. Julie, Keith and the others are truly a team of "Angels" wanting to give back to the community some of the blessings that they themselves have enjoyed in life, and have found a unique way to employ their skills and passion in that cause. If you would like to help them by donations or volunteering, visit them online at: angelflightse.org or call (352) 326-0761. ❖



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