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Flying For a Cause

Part 3: The "Who" of Charitable Flying

by Joe Ratterman

This month we will be concluding our three-part series on charitable flying. In the first article, I made an effort to convince you "why" you would want to be a volunteer pilot, and then in last month's edition I did my best to explain how the process works and made the case that incorporating charitable flying into your logbook is probably easier than you thought.

This month, as I wrap up the series, I wanted to share with you some of the kinds of situations that our passengers are going through, and how charitable aviation can really make a huge impact on their lives when going through difficult times.



In my experience over the last eight years of being a volunteer pilot, I have found that charitable aviation organizations usually fall into one of the following categories:

1. Medical and humanitarian missions
2. Military/veteran benefit
3. Animal rescue, and
4. Disaster relief.

I mostly fly medical-related missions for Angel Flight Central and a few Veteran's Airlift Command missions each year, and I have a close friend that has flown several missions for Pilots & Paws. With so many charitable aviation organizations out there to choose from, you should be able to find one or more that fit your own charitable passions as well.

It would be great if I could introduce you to the actual people my wife and I have flown over the years, but we must be careful to protect their confidential medical information and passenger identities, so instead I'll simply change the names and share with you the essence of a few of those stories from our 100-plus charitable missions. These are representative of the kinds of missions you would likely experience if/when you decide to step into charitable aviation.

Baby Ethan



Organizations such as Angel Flight, Corporate Angel Network, Veterans Airlift Command and others fly thousands of missions each year with the help of thousands of volunteer pilots across the world.

A young couple in Wichita was blessed with a beautiful baby boy. However, Ethan was born with a few small holes in his heart and he needed surgery at a specialty hospital in Denver. Because both parents and grandma were going with Ethan to Denver for two full weeks for the procedure, and because they had so much luggage and supplies, it wasn't economically feasible for them to fly commercially. Because of Ethan's heart condition, they couldn't drive the 11 hours to Denver, and they couldn't fly in the typical Angel Flight non-pressurized aircraft. The best choice for this mission was a pressurized private aircraft.

We took the mission and delivered mom, dad, baby Ethan, and grandma from KICT to KAPA in just under two hours, simplifying their travel situation dramatically.

The joy in their eyes and the relief on their faces after the surgery was completed was priceless! Ethan's operation was successful, and we've had several updates on Ethan's awesome progress from his grandma since the trip, as we've stayed in touch after getting to know them on the mission.



Joline

This young girl was born with a genetic respiratory disorder that keeps her from being able to breath reliably on her own. As a result, she is "tethered," nearly 24/7, with a long tube to a cumbersome medical device that assists her with breathing. There is a specialist in Chicago that wanted to evaluate Joline for a medical implant that would help regulate her breathing, similar to a pacemaker, but for the lungs instead of the heart. Like Ethan, Joline's traveling posse included mom, dad and grandma, and more luggage and medical equipment than you could imagine. Once again, a pressurized private aircraft was the only real solution to make this journey. We took both the



outbound and the return missions, and as a result of their visit in Chicago, Joline has been confirmed as a strong candidate for the specialized implant surgery later this year.

Gene

Gene was our first Angel Flight passenger ever, and was such a wonderful gentleman. He was married with kids and grandkids and mostly retired when we met him and his wife on our first mission together. He was recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but had two things going for him. First, they found it somewhat early, and second, he was referred to a specialist in Houston at MD Anderson who had an experimental regime that Gene qualified for. The prognosis for pancreatic cancer patients usually gives the patients six months to live, but Gene was able to live for more than five years after he was first diagnosed.

He and his wife needed to make regular trips to and from Houston to receive the treatment, at times as often as each week. Driving roundtrip from Kansas City to Houston that frequently would have been too much of a burden on a healthy person, much less someone going through cancer treatments. He also couldn't fly commercially because his immune system was compromised, so his only real practical solution was to fly in a private airplane. He didn't necessarily need a pressurized turbine aircraft, so he made many of his trips in smaller piston aircraft. We took him several times, and were happy to be a part of extending his life for so many years beyond the typical expectation for his cancer.



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Pilots N Paws brings together pilot volunteers to arrange and fly animal rescue flights, overnight foster care or shelter, and all other related activities.

Coach Mike

This college golf coach became acutely ill during a tournament in Nevada and was forced to stay behind in a hospital after the team returned home to Kansas City. It took the doctors several days to determine what was going on, and for a good portion of that time didn't think he was going to survive. It was a huge scare for everyone involved. His kidneys and respiratory system began failing, and eventually the doctors determined he had an acute and sudden onset of an autoimmune system condition.

After several more days, the doctors were able to stabilize Mike to a point that he could attempt to travel home to continue his treatment in Kansas City. His doctor wouldn't clear him to fly commercially or even to drive, so his only option was a turbine-powered aircraft that could make the journey nonstop and get him home quickly and checked into the KU Medical Center. Once again, a turbine class airplane was the only viable solution for Mike, and the coach and his family were so grateful to have him home in familiar surroundings on his long road to recovery.

These are but a few of the unique and deeply personal situations that we have had the opportunity of participating in over the years. I hope you've enjoyed this series on charitable aviation, and that you will feel inspired to take the first steps on your own journey as a volunteer pilot. Flying an airplane is an amazing privilege, but flying to help others will prove to be an eternal blessing not just for them, but for you too. **T&T**

Joe Ratterman is an ATP pilot, type-rated in the Cessna Citation Mustang C510, with 2,500-plus hours in his logbook. Joe retired from a successful corporate executive career in 2015 and now flies as a professional charter pilot for Kansas City Aviation Company (KCAC) based in Overland Park, Kansas. He is also the current board chairman/president for Angel Flight Central.

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