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Angels taking flight

BY Maishah English World Staff Writer
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Pilots volunteer time to transport patients

If there are really angels on Earth, they might come in the form of small aircraft guided by pilots who volunteer their time and wings with Angel Flight Inc.

Since 1991, Angel Flight has helped provide transportation for low-income people who need medical treatment outside of the state. But in the last decade, founder Doug Vincent said his biggest problem is finding the people who need help the most.

"Part of the problem is a lot of people do not know we are here. The people who need our help sometimes don't know we exist," Vincent said. "Word of mouth is a our biggest referrals. Not doctors or social worker."

Vincent founded the volunteer organization after he unsuccessfully sought ways to use his plane as a way to help others. He said he will give presentations to any group who asks.

"It started because I had an airplane and I wanted to use it to help people," he said. "I heard about these types of organizations, but there was none in the area for me to join."

He then organized a group of pilots and volunteers to donate time and planes. His goal was to start an organization that would arrange for free nonemergency air transportation for medical needs.

Vincent arranged and flew Angel Flight's first passenger in his own plane in 1991. Now he oversees the organization, but will fly when other pilots are unavailable.

"We own our planes because we like to fly. It is a selfish and expensive hobby so it is nice to be able to use this hobby to help people," Vincent said.

Patients usually travel for surgery, dialysis, chemotherapy and other treatments to hospitals such as MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston and other hospitals and facilities in Missouri and Minnesota. Angel Flight also arranges flights for those who may need to come to Tulsa from other states.

"We ask a third party, usually a social worker, to verify that there is a need before we arrange someone to fly," he said.

Patients must also have their physician sign a release that they are capable of flying on a small aircraft without bathroom facilities. The flights are easier on patients than long car or bus trips.

"This is not a medical flight. It is strictly nonemergency," he said.

Ed Sells, a former air traffic controller, volunteers as a mission coordinator for Angel Flight. He said the generosity of the pilots is amazing.

"I just got someone who was sitting on a beach in Hawaii and willing to fly a patient on New Year's Eve," said Sells.

Sells sends out routine e-mails twice a week to volunteer pilots when a patient has requested and been approved for a flight. The pool of licensed pilots live in Tulsa and beyond Oklahoma, including Arkansas, Kansas and Missouri. The office is based in south Tulsa at 1515 E. 71st St.

"Our pilots range from retirees, to physicians to prison guards," Vincent said. "Pilots use their own gas and there is no compensation for them."

Flights can cost about \$200 an hour in gas expenses, depending on the size of the plane. Angel Flight also networks with other flight transportation organizations when needed.

"We are all volunteer and there is no paid staff," Vincent said. "We are proud that we have been able to maintain it all these years."

Retired QuikTrip executive Al Howerton began volunteering with Angel Flight last year. He has used his Baron Beechcraft 58 for eight flights since he joined Angel Flight.

"I had always considered doing missionary work but guess I just wasn't brave enough," he said. "The first passenger I flew actually died three weeks after I brought her back from her last appointment. It can get hard because you get attached to the patients."

Betty Kline is a frequent flier and flies from Waxahachie, Texas to the Cancer Treatment Centers of America in south Tulsa.

"I have been flying with them for a little over a year. When I first started my cancer treatment I was went regularly. Then I could not afford to fly anymore," she said.

Kline, who is being treated for stage four breast cancer learned of the service from a friend.

"Once I found out I went and got the paperwork and had the doctor fill it out. It was all set up immediately. All I had to do was call them and tell them when I needed to go."

She is usually picked up from Midway Airport, which is a small airport close to her town.

"My first flight I was pretty scared to death. I am not one that likes to fly very much. The gentleman that picked me up made me feel very comfortable."

In the last year, Angel Flight has flown approximately 280 patients to a number of destinations for medical reasons.

"We are not out to compete with commercial airlines. We are just trying to fill a void that is there," Vincent said.

For more information, call 749-8992 or visit the Web site at www.angelflight.com.

Associated Images:



Doug Vincent founded Angel Flight Inc. in 1991.

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