

ANGEL FLIGHT

by Lindsay Whelchel

The pilot relied on his co-pilot to call off the pre-flight checklist. The gears, the gauges, the fuel, the wings—all were in order as the co-pilot reported with steady concentration. Once completed, they set off into the air.

Excitement and anticipation permeated the sleek plane owned by the pilot, Mark Haywood. With a level of attention closer to reverence, Taylor Peterson listened to every instruction as his hands took over the controls. Though this was his first time as co-pilot, he had longed for this opportunity since fifth grade.

For Taylor, now almost 16, this particular time in Haywood's plane was much different than the last time. Previously, his legs were both immobile and completely casted. Taylor was born with cerebral palsy and for years had to walk with his knees permanently bent until this surgery.

But in June of 2011, Taylor underwent a *patella advancement* and *femoral osteotomy*, an operation that would restructure his legs and allow for increased mobility. The challenges he had faced growing up were complicated even further in pursuit of this procedure—the surgery was to take place in Denver. Taylor had been receiving medical care in Colorado prior to his family's move to Tulsa earlier that spring. With his legs forced into a straight position to heal, a commercial flight was impossible for Taylor and the 11-hour drive would have been uncomfortable, to say the least. Taylor and his mother made the drive once already, with his condition making even bathroom pit stops extremely difficult.

"When I realized what lay ahead of us," says Leanna Peterson, Taylor's mother, "I just remember thinking, 'Okay, I've got to be resourceful—what can I do?'" Then she remembered hearing about a non-profit organization called Angel Flight. She called them, and they—quite literally—flew to the rescue.

Angel Flight, which began in 1992, offers medical flights to patients living in the heartland. The variety of needs range from chemotherapy treatments to surgeries. Whether because of unaffordability or the inability to endure a long drive, patients can seek the services of Angel Flight at no cost, explains Haywood, the organization's president. As a pilot himself, he initially flew Taylor to Colorado on his first trip.

Haywood, a longtime Edmond resident and co-founder of Unimark, a natural gas marketing company based in Edmond, began flying as a hobby in college. Being drawn to the organization as a way to give back to others, he began volunteering—first as a pilot, then by serving as a board member and now as president of Angel Flight.

Because of the nature of its services and the fact that it uses no paid staff to accomplish its goals, the non-profit is completely volunteer-driven. "It has given me an outlet to try to give something back to the community while, at the same time, doing something that I enjoy," Haywood says.

He explains that the people he meets inspire him. "All the patients I come into contact with are very compelling. They all seem to have a reserved, very powerful determination to overcome significant medical issues," Haywood says. These are people like Taylor, whom Haywood calls *remarkable*.

The boy's love of flying was apparent since his first meeting with Haywood. "He would ask me really intelligent questions that only somebody who was obviously interested in flying could ask," Haywood says. For Taylor, it goes beyond the thrill of flight.

REMEMBER THAT THE AIRPLANE TAKES OFF AGAINST THE WIND, NOT WITH IT. —HENRY FORD



TAYLOR PETERSON & MARK HAYWOOD

He wants to use piloting as a way to aid humanitarian missions in Congo, Africa. And because of his experience with Angel Flight, Taylor now also wants to grow up to give back in the same way as Haywood—by flying those in need to their destinations.

Taylor's mother credits the bond he has created with the

pilots who have flown him with helping him further his dreams. Taylor agrees and remarks that "It's really been amazing for me because even after a year and a half, I'm still in touch with my pilots." Also Taylor's joy was undeniable in seeing Haywood again and getting the opportunity to fly with him as a co-pilot instead of a patient.

"The service is greatly needed," Leanna says. "I think what Angel Flight offered us was the ability to keep a cohesive connection

with our medical team [in Denver] so we could get the best care possible for Taylor.” She adds that medical needs cannot always be met within a community, and it is sometimes necessary to go beyond the boundaries of a city or state. Haywood echoes this importance and also outlines the organization’s efforts to reach out to the medical community in order to let them know the option of flight exists.

“One of the challenges we face is that the public-at-large doesn’t know about Angel Flight. With a very limited budget, we try to spread the word through the healthcare community. We want to try to reach case managers and social workers because they are the frontline people who would be most knowledgeable about patients who really need air transportation and may not have access to it,” Haywood explains. “The need for medical air travel is growing and the costs are growing as well.”

For Taylor, the flights helped make his procedure and recovery possible. The surgery was successful and he is gaining mobility. His gratitude is very evident. “I think there is an answer for everything. If there’s a will, there’s a way—Angel Flight is just one of those ways.”

Henry Ford once said we must “remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.” Ford was talking about adversity, but more importantly, he was talking about *determination*. And there is perhaps no better word to describe the spirit of Taylor, and in turn, Angel Flight. Determined.

For more information on Angel Flight’s services and donation or pilot volunteering opportunities, visit www.angelflight.com



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