

Taking flight on angel missions: Pilots donate time to medical help nonprofit

by David Page

Published: July 10th, 2013



Craig Fitzgerald combines his love of flying with helping a good cause. (Photo by Brent Fuchs)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Craig Fitzgerald says he took his first airplane flight when he was 3½ months old.

Fitzgerald grew up between Cushing and Stillwater and his father, Bob Fitzgerald, was a pilot.

“My father just liked to fly,” Craig Fitzgerald said. “We took all our family trips in an airplane. I did not take a car trip until I was about 16.”

His mother got her pilot’s license when he was 2 years old.

“She wanted to know how to land,” he said.

With his early introduction to flying, it was natural that Fitzgerald also became a pilot.

“I got my pilot’s license when I was 17,” he said. “I wanted to get my license as fast as I could.”

Craig Fitzgerald is now an attorney with GableGotwals in Tulsa and is still flying. But he now gets a lot of his flying time as a volunteer pilot for Angel Flight Oklahoma, a nonprofit organization that arranges free transportation for medical treatment through volunteer pilots and airplanes for needy patients and health care organizations.

Primary financial support for Angel Flight Oklahoma comes from the volunteer pilots and contributions from individuals, groups and corporations. There are no fundraising events or money from any government entity.

“We are all volunteers and we do not have paid staff,” said Bob Dimski, another Angel Flight Oklahoma pilot and a family physician in Midwest City. “Our pilots donate their time, their airplanes and the fuel.”

Angel Flight Oklahoma has about 100 active volunteer pilots. Pilots must be instrument-certified, Dimski said.

“It would be nice to have more pilots who are looking for an excuse to poke holes in the sky and do good work as well,” he said.

Angel Flight Oklahoma primarily serves patients needing transportation to and from Oklahoma. By coordinating with other organizations, Angel Flight Oklahoma can arrange for patients on longer flights to other states.

Patients are often flying for surgery, chemotherapy or dialysis. A typical flight may carry patients from Oklahoma for treatment at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

In the two years Fitzgerald has been an Angel Flight pilot he has made several trips to take patients to and from M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. Dimski also has flown patients to M.D. Anderson.

A trip to Houston and back usually takes about six-and-a-half hours.

"It takes about two-and-a-half hours to fly to Houston," Fitzgerald said. "I will grab something to eat and fly back."

He has also made volunteer flights to Memphis, Tenn.; Dallas; Omaha, Neb.; and central Missouri.

For his flights, Craig Fitzgerald uses a six-seat Beechcraft Baron he owns with his father, who is a certified public accountant in Sand Springs. He keeps the Beechcraft Baron at River Side Airport in Tulsa.

His volunteering for Angel Flight Oklahoma includes his time, the airplane and fuel.

"For someone who has a professional career, it is really the time I am contributing," Fitzgerald said. "Carving out the time, especially when you have two teenage kids, is really the sacrifice."

As an Angel Flight pilot, Fitzgerald said he also sees the people his contribution helps.

"In my mind it is easy to give money," he said. "With Angel Flight, I get much more of a sense of helping people. I get to see the people I am helping."

Fitzgerald said he volunteered for Angel Flight Oklahoma because he owned the Beechcraft Baron and the nonprofit organization gave him a reason to fly.

"It gives me a reason to fly and at the same time I am able to help someone," he said.

Normally his flights have been on weekends and he usually gets about three days' notice. The patients are normally with him on only one leg of the trip – he is either taking them for treatment or picking them up and taking them home.

Fitzgerald said he often takes along a passenger – often his teenage son – just to keep him company on the flights.

And like when he was growing up, Fitzgerald uses his airplane for family trips.

"We will go to Colorado to ski every year around Christmas," he said.

Fitzgerald said his 15-year-old son is developing an interest in flying.

"Two years ago my wife got her pilot's license," he said. "When she was studying for the pilot's test, he would study too. He could probably have passed the test when she took her test."

Like Fitzgerald, Dimski had an early introduction to flying – he grew up in an Air Force family and his father was a career pilot.

"I actually flew when I was in high school," he said. "I had a pilot's license before I had a driver's license."

Dimski said he gave up flying while he was in college and medical school. He graduated from Del City High School, then went to Texas Tech University and the University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio. He has been a family physician in Midwest City for 27 years.

About 15 years ago, Dimski took some flying lessons and again was a licensed pilot. He has been an Angel Flight Oklahoma volunteer pilot for about 12 years.

"I have flown about 43 or 44 missions for Angel Flight," he said.

"It is always a great experience is someone needs to go to the cancer center in Tulsa or to M.D. Anderson," Dimski said. "I have met some wonderful people and hopefully helped people on their road to health."

He keeps his airplane, an S Model Bonanza, at Max Westheimer Airport in Norman.

His dad, the former Air Force pilot, is an Angel Flight mission coordinator volunteer.

"He arranges flights for the pilots," Dimski said of his father, who will have his 80th birthday on Sunday. "We fly missions together and he enjoys talking with the pilots."

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