

Angels Among Us

Pediatric patient Anthony needed to travel to St. Jude in Memphis, Tennessee, for treatment, and CAN delivered.

FLYING



**Business aviation
gives back by providing
critical lift.**

By Julie Boatman

FLYING



When we look at the sleek outlines of the latest Cessna Citation Latitude, Pilatus PC-24 or Gulfstream G600, we see the potential for performance, agility, and the speed that gets us to a destination safely and in style. What a cancer patient sees—looking at that same airstair door—is entirely different. Therein lies a protected cocoon, a nurturing shell in which an immunocompromised soul can fly to treatment without worry.

Using these amazing tools we know as pilots day in and day out, we may not fully comprehend how life-transforming their capabilities can be—save for those angels among us who fly urgent medical transport and volunteer their time and abilities to do so.

Hope, Faith, Answered Prayers

Mark Pestal—a Denver-based attorney and commercial pilot—is one of those pilots. Pestal founded AeroAngel, based at Centennial Airport (KAPA) in Colorado, and he donates much of his time and resources toward the organization. Since January 2010, the AeroAngel mission has been able to connect sick children with the wings to access distant medical care. With more than \$2 million worth of in-kind or monetary donations in total, AeroAngel has helped more than 200 children receive critical care to date.

In the first four months of 2019, AeroAngel tallied more flights than it had in 2018—but a lot has changed since this year began. The mission remains critical,

however, so Pestal and the organization's volunteer pilots have worked to find a way to carry on flying through the challenging first half of 2020.

Brent Bythewood, one patient's father, relates the urgency underlying the missions: "I was tasked back in May with trying to figure out how to get my critically ill daughter, Emily, from Nashville [Tennessee] to Boston for an extremely complex open-heart surgery. My options were: putting her in a car for an 18-hour drive or...well, because of COVID-19, there weren't any other feasible options."

"The idea of the organization is to transport extremely sick kids to the lifesaving procedures or the best doctors for their diagnosis," Bythewood says. "[Pestal] does this by using [private] jets rather than smaller lightweight planes [because of] mileage and weight constraints." This focus on jets, crewed by volunteer professional pilots, stands out and allows for a level of care needed by those very sick children facing severe chronic illnesses. It also makes long distances go by more quickly and comfortably than could be possible on the airlines or, conversely, on lighter GA aircraft.

It's a task getting out in front of donors, whether it's pilots or owners or those with the means to support the costs of these trips. However, in 2018, AeroAngel took on a donated Learjet 55—crewed by pilots trained at FlightSafety International—which enables nonstop trips from Denver to either coast. Pestal would love to add another aircraft to their hangar.

Wade Tagg flies an Embraer Phenom 300 on AeroAngel missions, a culmination of the 20 years of civilian flying he has logged since he started off as a flight instructor in Longmont, Colorado. For the past six years, he's flown for one owner, stepping up with that owner from a Cirrus SR22 to a Pilatus PC-12, and in 2018, to the Phenom, which he flies single-pilot. For the past three years, the owner and Tagg have donated the aircraft and piloting time to AeroAngel, and Tagg's conducted several flights.

No one patient stands out to Tagg—"They all seem important"—though one "triple" flight took him from the aircraft's base at Longmont's airport (KLMO) to California, then out to the East Coast before returning to Longmont. In the process, the flight served one teen and two younger children over the course of two days. "It's so nice to have the right equipment to get the job done," Tagg says. "And it's so impressive to see how hard [Pestal] works to figure out how to help."

Corporate Angel Network

The folks at the Corporate Angel Network know that effort all too well. Their only mission? To give a lift to cancer patients—that's why CAN was founded in 1981. The goal? To use empty seats on corporate aircraft to provide that critical transportation. While AeroAngel works directly with private-jet owners, CAN has looped into the flight departments of major Fortune 500 companies to secure needed lift.

Founder Priscilla "Pat" Blum, a pilot holding a

The goal? To use empty seats on corporate aircraft to provide that critical transportation. While AeroAngel works directly with private-jet owners, CAN has looped into the flight departments of major Fortune 500 companies to secure needed lift.

commercial certificate—and a cancer survivor herself—joined forces with Jay Weinberg, the then-owner of an Avis rental-car franchise in Mount Vernon, New York, and pilot Leonard Greene, president of Safe Flight Instrument Corporation. Weinberg was also a cancer survivor, and Greene had lost his wife to cancer, so the mission was intensely personal for all. On December 22, 1981, CAN flew a patient from his treatment in New York City back home to Detroit just in time for Christmas.

Roughly 500 corporations in the US—including half of the top 100 of the Fortune 500—have donated seats to CAN over the nearly four decades since its inception, with more than 60,000 flights coordinated in total by the group. Eligibility is not based on financial need, and patients can use the service as often as they need to.

Of the current corporate partners—who normally represent at least 1,200 flights each year—only a couple dozen are currently donating flights, mostly because of greatly reduced (or temporarily grounded) flight departments. But those who are still giving to CAN are doing so in a very generous way. Instead of a company offering empty seats on a handful of segments in its network, companies have contacted CAN to see what patients need most urgently. "The companies are being creative and nimble," says Gina Russo, executive director for CAN. "We're not flying as many patients, but those in need are getting help."

For example, a recent flight took a 3-year-old girl up to Boston and back for a critical major surgery on her leg. Because it's typically hard to match up flight schedules, such out-and-back flights are rare during normal times.

FLYING

Instead of a company offering empty seats on a handful of segments in its network, companies have contacted CAN to see what patients need most urgently.

Below, the passengers are all smiles on board the direct flight to critical care.

On the opposite page, Ava pauses for a moment on the airstairs, cradling her copilot.



But the company offered the round-trip flight knowing that it would be nearly impossible to find another partner to take her home in COVID times. Companies are also using repositioning and post-maintenance flights to fulfill urgent needs. Only those patients who require special medical attention are traveling these days, according to Russo. Many who are stable can use telemedicine or find local therapy for the time being.

How does it work normally? When a patient requests transportation, and the database indicates there's a scheduled flight within 100 miles of both departure and destination airports, CAN will call to verify whether the flight is going and seats are available. If seats are available and the patient can take that flight, CAN then calls the company back to request the flight and obtain a final clearance. Patients book backup commercial flights in the event a corporate partner needs to change their flights—which clearly happens all the time in the business-aviation world, coronavirus or not.

Fundraising has also taken a new twist during the pandemic, with CAN's major charity event normally held at the annual National Business Aviation Association convention. Instead, CAN has a virtual auction underway, closing on October 7. Russo explains, "Cancer does not wait." To solicit donations through the auction, several companies—including Universal Weather and Aviation, Nike, and American Airlines—have contributed experiences to bid on, so CAN will remain aloft through the crisis.

And though she's now coming up on her 96th birthday, Blum still considers CAN among the most important aspects of her life well-lived. "Next to my family, it's dearest to my heart."

Other Ways To Help

Another mission-specific organization that coordinates vital transportation through use of corporate and private aircraft, Veterans Airlift Command, puts its efforts into the service of those who have served their country—and paid a price. Started after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the VAC primarily supports those who have been wounded in the conflicts that have followed, along with their families. Volunteer pilots and aircraft owners have stepped up to fly more than 10,000 passengers to date, using mostly turboprop twins and jet aircraft to suit particular needs.

On the civilian side, the Angel Flight network of charitable organizations also holds opportunities for

FLYING



medical-related airlift through its web of regional partners. Pilots and aircraft owners typically volunteer service of their light singles and twins to carry ambulatory patients within a state or region, or they collaborate to span farther distances. Using anything from a Cessna 182 on up, Angel Flight pilots work wherever there is need.

And because that need doesn't stop—not even for a pandemic—those who volunteer their time to fly others to critical care are always looking for pilots, aircraft, and a hand from anyone willing and able to assist. Perhaps your new mission awaits. ●

How To Help

Are you a corporate pilot, aircraft owner or interested volunteer? Check out the organizations listed below to determine if there's a good match for your aircraft, skills and availability to help those in need of critical medical care.

- AeroAngel [aeroangel.org]
- Corporate Angel Network [corpangelnetwork.org]
- Veterans Airlift Command [veteransairlift.org]
- Angel Flight [angelflight.com/locator]