

# Flights of Hope

By Anne Cassidy



“It’s like Jim and Dylan are angels sitting on the wings.”

Seven years ago Sandy Turner and her husband, David, were two hours away from their Nashville, Illinois, home at a weekend crafts show when they got the call that changed their lives. Their son, Jim, almost 33, and his nine-month-old son, Dylan, had drowned after their sightseeing float plane flipped over in a water landing. Jim’s wife, Ann, was pulled out of the wreckage alive. But Jim and the baby didn’t make it.

By the time Sandy and David arrived home later that September day, their house was filled with friends and family offering support. Nashville is a town of about 3,000, and many people knew Jim, who was a state trooper and all-around good guy. The day of his funeral a line of mourners stretched out the church and down the block. When Sandy thanked one of Jim’s friends for waiting in line until midnight, he said, “For Jim I would have stayed all night.”

Life after the loss was agony for the whole family. Jim’s wife, Ann, patched her broken life together and eventually moved back to her home state of Ohio. Jim’s sisters, Julie and Jennifer, tried to comfort their parents as best they could. Jim’s father, David, was lost without his only son. “I don’t think he ever got over losing Jim,” Sandy says. “There was a spark that disappeared from David after Jim died.” Three years after the accident David died of lung cancer.



Jim Turner with his infant son, Dylan, in 1997. Jim’s mother, Sandy, says that their deaths were a tremendous sorrow, but it makes her heart glad to see good come from the tragedy.

Now Sandy was alone in the country house she’d built with her husband. “As devastated as you are, your life goes on and you have to do the best you can with it,” she says. “It doesn’t mean that you don’t have this big emptiness in your life. But you have to go on for everyone else and for your own peace of mind.” Sandy kept herself busy with her daughters and their families. She baby-sat her grandkids, crocheted and quilted, and took bus trips with her friends. And then one day she read an article. It was about N206KY, the single-engine plane in which her son and grandson had died. Wings of Hope, an organization in nearby St. Louis, had bought the plane and was rebuilding it for humanitarian missions.

After reading the article Sandy went to her computer. “I’m not even sure why I did it,” she muses. “I sat down with the idea of e-mailing the man who wrote the article and for some reason that’s not what I did.” She e-mailed Wings of Hope instead. Sandy wrote that her son’s and

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Photo, Lonna Tucker/Check Six (top).



**Left: Sandy Turner worked with Bob Masters and other volunteers to refurbish "Jim's plane" for charity missions. Above: Wings of Hope marks on a map each location it serves.**

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grandson's deaths were "a tremendous sorrow" for herself and her family, but "knowing there is good coming from that accident does my heart good." It would soon do her heart even better.

Wings of Hope was founded in 1962 by four St. Louis businessmen. Two years later the first Wings of Hope plane, a Cessna Skywagon, took off on its mission of mercy. Now the largest international volunteer organization in the Midwest, Wings of Hope has 146 planes operating in 39 different countries. Although it receives at least 50 requests for new programs a year, it can start only four to five because each one requires an airplane (either purchased or donated) and months or years to refurbish the aircraft and fit it out for rough terrain. "We rebuild everything on the plane—make our own sheet metal pieces, drill our own metal, rivet our own rivets," says Douglas Clements, Wings of Hope executive director. All rebuilt Wings of Hope airplanes are thoroughly inspected before flying again and none has ever failed inspection for mechanical problems, Clements says.

## An Airplane Is Reborn

When Clements saw the plane that took Jim and Dylan Turner's lives (an insurance company's salvage yard had put it up for sale), he knew he'd found something worth buying. "It's a Cessna 206, which means it's almost indestructible," he says. "It flies under half power, and can land on the roughest farm fields." It also has high wings that can clear fences and double-wide cargo doors that accommodate stretchers. This particular Cessna 206 was battered but salvageable. But that didn't mean it was ready to fly.

"It was so badly damaged, we had to buy another aircraft and take the good parts off it to rebuild," says Bob Masters, a 37-year veteran of aerospace manufacturer McDonnell-Douglas and longtime volunteer at Wings of Hope, who was crew chief for N206KY. "We're the only organization in the world that will take a piece of scrap aircraft and refurbish it. And because of all the donated labor, the only charge is for parts." It would take 22 months and dozens of people like Bob to restore N206KY.

But when Sandy first contacted Wings of Hope, she did not know any of this; she just had a good feeling about the place. A few e-mails and phone calls later, Sandy decided to attend the organization's holiday luncheon held in their

Spirit of St. Louis Airport hangar headquarters in December 2002. She was already going to a concert in St. Louis that day with friends, and Wings of Hope volunteers would transport her to headquarters and back again. It seemed as though the meeting was meant to be. "My mother was really excited the day she went to the Christmas luncheon," recalls Jennifer Szopinski, Sandy's younger daughter. "But she was nervous about seeing the plane."

Sandy will never forget her first glimpse of N206KY: "It was totally dismantled. There was nothing but the hull. The wings were off, the engine was out. There was nothing there but this body, this shell." There were so many thoughts racing through Sandy's head. She was remembering her son, who had always reached out to others, and her grandson, who had just begun to live. But when she took in the whole scene, not just the plane but the hangar bustling with life, the volunteers busily sanding and drilling and cleaning—working their hearts out so that someday that airplane would fly again, on errands of mercy—it wasn't sadness she felt but hope. And there was another feeling: belonging.

"It was so emotional when Sandy Turner saw the plane," says Bob Masters, who was there that day. By the time Sandy arrived at the luncheon, a smiling woman in her 60s wearing a bright-red sweater, Wings of Hope volunteers knew her story. One even broke down in tears when Sandy looked at the plane, knowing the heartache it had brought her. But Sandy kept her composure.

By the time she left that day she felt as if she'd always known the volunteers. Sandy decided her first visit would not be her last: "I had an immediate feeling of wanting to work with this group." She wanted to play some part, however small, in bringing N206KY back to life.

A month or so later Sandy again traveled the 85 miles to Wings of Hope headquarters, but this time she was dressed for work. Her 20 years as the office manager of a veterinarian's office in Nashville (the job she retired from) had not exactly prepared her for aeronautical engineering, but there was still plenty for her to do. One time, Sandy says, "Someone just gave me a big bucket of cleaner and said, 'Here, clean these parts,'" so Sandy spent the next few hours cleaning and sanding reusable airplane parts for N206KY. It was menial work but she wanted to do something, anything, for "Jim's plane."

From those first few visits she became the frequent vol-

unteer she is today. Sometimes she processed large mailings and once she even helped crank a commercial sewing machine into working order. Even when she didn't work directly on N206KY, she'd check on its progress every visit. "I really got to know the group of men who were working on the plane. Whenever I'd arrive they'd say, 'Come see where we are.' I felt like I was adopted by that group of guys," Sandy says. It no longer hurt her to see the plane. It became part of her life. One time a photographer snapped a picture of Sandy and the plane. "The guys hung it up on their bulletin board. They said, 'I bet you never thought you'd be a pinup girl at your age,'" Sandy says, laughing.

More to the point, Sandy never thought people would make a fuss about her. "I don't feel I've done anything special," she says, resisting accolades for her work. The people who deserve praise, she says, are the volunteer doctors, teachers and laborers who ship out for days, weeks or months to Ecuador or Venezuela or a reservation in Arizona. They're the ones combating malaria and delivering vital supplies. One recent volunteer flew a legless Guatemalan man to a doctor to be fitted with a prosthesis. Once there he found that the doctor himself wore a prosthesis. "That's the kind of thing that seems to happen with Wings of Hope," Sandy says. "You know God has a hand in this."

## Missions of Mercy

Bob Masters feels the same way: When he's working at Wings of Hope, which he does a couple days a week, his eyes are often drawn to the map in the hangar with lights that mark each place transformed by the charity. "Every flight is a mercy flight," he says. "That sounds melodramatic but it's really true. When you say the organization has saved thousands of lives, it sounds like an exaggeration, but when doctors and nurses go out into the field and give a baby boy typhoid and diphtheria shots and that child grows up and marries and has a family—without those original shots maybe none of that would have happened. So it's not an exaggeration to say that many, many lives are affected."

Until recently Wings of Hope always shipped its airplanes far away. But that changed when N206KY rolled off the reassembly line. Responding to a request for medical care in its own backyard, "Jim's plane" is now a medical air transport based in St. Louis that flies patients to specialized medical treatment facilities for free. One of the first people it flew was Jeffrey Hug of O'Fallon, Missouri, a 19-year-old who suffered massive leg injuries in a boating accident in July 2003. N206KY flew him from the hospital to a rehabilitation center 90 miles away. "I don't know what we would have done otherwise," says Pamela Hug, Jeffrey's mother, who had exhausted all other affordable options for her son. "It was amazing the way people stepped up to do things for people they didn't even know." Hug says she only learned later the history

of the plane. Now she's even more amazed that "such good could come out of such a tragedy."

By the time N206KY was ready to fly, Sandy was getting used to the idea of good flowing from bad. On May 16, 2003, the plane—with WINGS OF HOPE and a red cross newly painted on its side—was dedicated at the Spirit of St. Louis airport. Over 300 people came to the ceremony, including many of Sandy's family and friends from Nashville. It was a solemn moment and a proud moment. But of all the words spoken that day, what people remember most were the ones uttered by an eloquent yet plainspoken mother. "My son always wanted to help others," Sandy said. "And to think that this plane is now helping others, well, it's like Jim and Dylan are angels sitting on the wings." **FC**

## Reporter's Notebook: Good Works in Ecuador

**A former Wings of Hope volunteer recounts some of her life-changing experiences during an expedition in Ecuador.**

**Day 1:** At the hangar in Shell, near Puyo, my eyes immediately embraced a family sitting patiently on a bench outside—a pregnant mother, a child and father. They were waiting for the weather to clear so that they could return to their community in one of the remote villages. They looked with hope and a sense of helplessness at Carlos Godoy, the pilot based in Ecuador who would fly them home on the Wings of Hope, or "Alas de Esperanza," aircraft. The boy had developed pneumonia and would have died without Carlos transporting him from the village to receive medical assistance.

**Day 2:** The family continued to wait for their flight home, and I realized how reliant they were on the aircraft as a means of transportation. A sense of sadness filled my spirit as I thought of all the others in need, waiting in the villages.

**Day 3:** The weather cooperated and finally the family could go home. We all boarded the airplane together. This was the first day the other

volunteers and I could head out to the jungle to visit several villages. Once at our destination, we distributed medical supplies with the hope that years from now our efforts would result in children growing up strong and adults living longer, healthier lives.

**Day 4:** We flew to Lorocachi and walked to the River Curaray, stopping along the way to view a variety of buildings, including the school. The buildings resembled structures still under construction, but, in fact, they are used daily. In the school, worn out, cracked plywood blackboards had become so whitened by the chalk embedded in the scored wood that they were basically of no use.

**Day 5:** Today was filled with administrative meetings. An early departure was scheduled for the next morning. We had a farewell dinner with our pilot, Carlos, and his family to say good-bye.

Throughout this journey I saw families reaching out for medical, educational, and daily living needs—blessings we often take for granted. Perhaps a more hopeful future awaits those in need as more of us open our hearts and offer a helping hand of humanity.

—Karen Glines