

Charitable Flying



by Daniel Kukla

MMOPA member Bob Baker and MMOPA Executive Director Dianne White – both Angel Flight volunteer pilots – meet at Cox Field in northern Texas for a patient handoff between Angel Flight regions.

Emilee Williams woke up from surgery with a feeding tube, unable to move or even whisper. No one knew for sure what happened during the procedure that essentially paralyzed her body, but the unexpected outcome was terrifying.

This was once a healthy and ambitious young woman who was

ready to graduate from college and take on the physical therapy doctorate program at Rockhurst University. Now all she could do was blink.

The immobilization combined with excruciating amounts of pain scared Emilee to the brink of suicide. Since she couldn't even point at pictures, she was forced to learn a tedious blinking system to

communicate with her family and doctors. Her rigid body hurt so much during 12 nightmare weeks in the hospital that she used her eyes to spell, "Please let me die," to her family.

Everyone left the room in tears, but they refused to let Emilee go. They found hope with help from an organization of volunteer pilots



Volunteer pilots save lives through the power of aviation

A vibrant college student, Emilee was affected by a rare genetic disease that took two years to correctly diagnose. Unable to endure the 11-hour car ride from Springfield, Missouri to one of the only treatment centers in the nation in Michigan, Emilee was grateful that St. Louis-based Wings of Hope could provide transportation to and from treatment.



who played a vital role in Emilee's extraordinary recovery that exceeded even the most optimistic boundaries on her range of possible outcomes projected by medical experts.

A Deadly Disease

Doctors diagnosed Emilee at age 21 with Wilson's Disease. This rare genetic disorder prevents a body from

Today Emilee (right) is fully recovered and thankful for the critical role Wings of Hope played in her recovery.

eliminating excess copper, which then accumulates in and attacks the liver and brain.

While Wilson's disease is treatable to the point of patients maintaining their normal



Disease diagnosis, triggering the start of those 12 weeks in the hospital that nearly broke her will to live.

Emilee's body could no longer endure the 11-hour car ride required to travel to one of just six medical centers in the country certified to treat her rare disorder. She couldn't even sit upright long enough to fly on a commercial airline, and expenses for reoccurring round-trip flights would have been astronomical.

Her situation seemed hopeless.

"I didn't really have much of a future," Emilee said.

That's when her family found a nonprofit charitable flying organization called "Wings of Hope," the lifeline that connected Emilee to the team of experts who pulled her health out of that deadly tailspin.

A Life-Saving Solution

Jack Taylor will never forget the "foggy, nasty day" on which he met Emilee in her hometown of Springfield, Missouri. As a volunteer pilot for Wings of Hope, his mission was to transport Emilee more than 700 miles to a Wilson's Disease Center of Excellence at the University of Michigan.

Low rain clouds made the flight challenging by reducing visibility and available landing sites to a near minimum. For Emilee and her family, the flight was also free of charge.

Jack received his mission through Wings of Hope's "Medical Relief & Air Transport" (MAT) Program, which leverages donated airplanes and volunteer pilots like himself to fly people to hospitals and treatment centers where they can receive specialized health care that is not available to them locally.

Jack couldn't help but notice the blinking system Emilee and her older sister, Alaina, used to communicate as they loaded Emilee into the Piper PA-34 Seneca owned by Wings of Hope. The task took quite some

Angel Flight Central helped Haley, who is undergoing cancer treatment at Mayo Clinic, to play in her hockey team's state championship match. Haley was able to play and then return to Mayo to continue treatment the next day.

lifestyles, the condition can be fatal when not addressed early. It took Emilee roughly two years to receive an accurate diagnosis after experiencing initial symptoms in 2011. She cycled through a revolving door of doctors and treatments aimed mostly at addressing her suddenly severe anxiety and depression, a frustrating and disheartening process that allowed her health to deteriorate as her brain accumulated life-threatening levels of copper.

"I began feeling like a lab rat and like I was crazy," Emilee said. "I was being poked and prodded, taking all these different tests and getting nowhere. I knew in my gut something was wrong – something bigger than anxiety and depression – but the doctors kept telling me I was okay."

By the time an MRI requested by Emilee's desperate mother and concerned professors finally revealed the copper in her brain, it was almost too late. Her health bottomed out less than a month after the Wilson's

time, but the twin-engine aircraft was specially outfitted by Wings of Hope with a stretcher to accommodate fragile and non-ambulatory patients like her with room for family members like Alaina.

Jack also came prepared to navigate the soggy weather conditions. Like all Wings of Hope volunteer pilots, he is instrument rated with a commercial license. As a veteran Vietnam helicopter pilot with more than 55 years of flying experience, he has logged well over the required minimum of 1,000 hours in small aircraft.

Wings of Hope flew Emilee on six total round trips to the Wilson's Disease Clinic and back from 2014-16. These flights empowered her with access to the doctors and resources representing her best chance at recovery. Due to the rarity and severity of her disease, Emilee did not have any other viable options for effective treatment. Also due to her disease, the one place she needed to go seemed all but impossible for her to reach before discovering this service.

To put it much more bluntly, Emilee said that without Wings of Hope, "I would not have survived."

An Engine of Volunteers

Wings of Hope flies approximately 200 MAT missions each year, covering 26 states within a 600-mile radius from its headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri. The organization was a St. Louis Spirit Award finalist for advancing the city's rich history and global reputation as a hub of innovation; although it did not win in that category of the St. Louis Regional Chamber's "Arcus Awards," Wings of Hope did win the People's Choice Awards by popular vote.

"It's an organization that's on a good trajectory," Wings of Hope Board Member and MMOPA Member Don Kukla said.

All of this is supported by approximately 300 highly skilled and engaged volunteers. The group includes 20 MAT pilots, 80 mechanics and all the accountants, flight coordinators and administrative support staff – even each member of the volunteer recruitment and retention team itself. These volunteers often come

to Wings of Hope with professional experience in their respective role. Some are retired. Some are in the prime of their career. All are deeply passionate about the humanitarian impact they make by volunteering their time and skill.

"Every activity we do is directly touched by the hand of a volunteer," Wings of Hope President and

Angel Flight Central helped Haley get her team's state championship, a logistical impossibility otherwise.



CEO Bret Heinrich said. “Our volunteers are the engine that runs this organization.”

A majority of MAT passengers are children with congenital disorders and rare or life-threatening health conditions. The need for orthopedic specialists is especially common because of a condition doctors call “clubfoot” seen in approximately one out of every 1,000 babies.

“It brings tears to your eyes,” Jack said. “You feel like what you’re doing is worth the effort. It’s pretty rewarding.”

Once Wings of Hope begins transporting a patient, the organization commits to flying them to post-op care and treatment for as long as it is needed. The MAT Program relieves these individuals and their families of the stresses and financial burdens of arranging and paying for travel.

“Clubfoot and many of the conditions we provide services for are on-going,” Bret said. “Their treatment requires many flights. We are able to do that at no cost to their family.”

Wings of Hope places no income restrictions on who the MAT program serves because, as Bret puts it, “The service we provide would be a financial hardship on just about anyone.”

There are also no age restrictions for MAT passengers. The only

criteria for someone requesting a MAT flight are their location and medical clearance to fly after a final screening by the organization’s Chief Medical Officer.

Wings of Hope is a global humanitarian charity with a scope that is much broader than the MAT program. The nonprofit uses the power of aviation to help the world’s poorest citizens access the basic resources essential for human dignity: health, education, economic opportunity and food security.

The world of charitable flying is also much broader than just this one organization.

An Angel on Ice

Stage II Hodgkin’s Lymphoma Cancer didn’t kill 13-year-old Haley Jundt’s desire to play in her state championship hockey tournament. Four 21-day cycles of chemotherapy to treat her condition didn’t quell her hockey fever, either.

The only thing stopping Haley from joining her team was a 12-hour drive from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota to the tournament site in Watford City – a logistical roadblock because of Haley’s scheduled chemo treatment on the day before the puck dropped.

So Haley’s social worker put in a request to Angel Flight Central (AFC), a volunteer nonprofit organization whose mission it is to, “Serve people in need by arranging charitable flights for health care or other humanitarian purposes.”

An AFC pilot volunteered to fill the flight request within 24 hours and also arranged transportation for Haley from the airport to the rink. He was only a little surprised to hear that Haley’s large bag of hockey gear was making the trip, too.

“Oh, she’s playing?” Haley’s mom, Leann Jundt, recalled the pilot saying when he heard about the cargo.

Haley’s team was even more surprised when she walked into the locker room.

“They were all like, ‘What the heck, how did you get here?’” Haley said. “It felt pretty good to go play with them instead of sit in a hospital room. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was amazing.”

Haley’s team finished fifth in the tournament, but she still celebrated a much more significant victory. Haley rang the bell signifying she beat cancer on March 6 and held a cancer-free party on April 6.

A Grand Slam

The service provided by AFC compares closely the Wings of Hope MAT program. One fundamental difference, however, is who owns the airplanes used for the flights.

While Wings of Hope owns and provides airplanes for its volunteer pilots to fly, AFC pilots use their own aircraft. Each approach comes with its own advantages and challenges.

Because it owns the aircraft, Wings of Hope can specially outfit them to accommodate a wider spectrum of patients – people like Emilee who need to lay flat on a stretcher rather than sitting upright. The tradeoff is a narrower set of potential volunteer pilots. Flying a Wings of Hope plane requires a commercial pilot’s license and multi-engine rating in addition to instrument rating and 1,000 hours of logged flight time; volunteer pilots commit to fly at least two trips per month and attend one monthly Flight Operations Team meeting.

Conversely, AFC accommodates a larger pool of potential volunteer pilots with more constraints on who is physically able to fly as a patient. In addition to instrument rating, AFC volunteer pilots must have at least 250 hours of Pilot-in-Command (PIC) Time with 500 hours of total time. A commercial pilot’s license reduces



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the Total Time requirement to only the 250 PIC hours, but it is not required, nor is multiengine rating for anyone flying a single-engine aircraft.

“If you love to fly, this is a great opportunity to embrace that passion in a way that also makes a very significant and positive impact on other people,” AFC Executive Director Don Sumple said. “By flying as a volunteer pilot, you get to do what you want to do and also provide a wonderful charitable act. It’s not just a home run, it’s a grand slam.”

Don remembers a woman emailing him about her son with brain cancer. She lived in a rural area and her child’s best chance for survival was at Duke University. She supported her family of five on minimum wage after her husband lost his job. A round trip commercial flight cost close to \$1,000 per person and they needed to make numerous



Wings of Hope volunteer pilot Jack Taylor with two flight nurses with one of the organization’s specially equipped aircraft.

visits. She was worried about putting food on the table and clothes on their back.

“AFC not only gives our patients access to their needed medical treatment, it also saves them some dollars to maintain quality of life for bare necessities,” Don Sumple said. “It’s horrible for somebody to have

to make a choice between those things. That was eye opening.”

Many Outlets for Flying Passions

AFC coordinated 2,197 flights during its 2018 fiscal year. Volunteer pilots flew 832 of those flights, spanning 186,097 charitable miles.

In addition to transporting patients with medical needs, AFC also uses aviation for humanitarian efforts. The organization will relocate people suffering from domestic abuse. When floods washed over Nebraska in March, AFC provided relocation flights for survivors and flew in supplies.

“Each one of us only a phone call away from knowing a person in need or being a person in need,” Don Sumple said.

“It touches our hearts because it could easily be us. That drives our organization to help as many people as possible.”

AFC is one of nine charitable flying organizations under the Air Charity Network. Each variant serves a different region of the United States: Central, West, East, Northeast, Southeast, Mid-Atlantic, Oklahoma and Soars (South). Each regional organization operates independently from each other but are part of Air Charity Network, which is the collaborative organization that brings them all together.

There are more than 20 other charitable flying organizations in addition to Wings of Hope and the Angel Flight network, with services ranging from disaster relief, animal rescue, military/veteran benefit and humanitarian missions.

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More Than a Miracle

Doctors often call Emilee a walking miracle – a label Emilee said she hates.

“I worked my ass off (during my recovery),” Emilee said. “A miracle is something that happens overnight.”

Candidly, Emilee admits she once hated God and blamed him for her pain and suffering.

Looking back, Emilee now suspects her remarkable recovery received at least some divine influence. It wasn't long ago that just talking and walking again seemed like more than anyone could ever ask or even imagine for her. Now at age 27, she can not only bathe and dress herself, but also run, play soccer, wakeboard and cliff jump – after climbing up on her own.

“My personal mantra is ‘everything happens for a reason,’ and I believe God gave me this disease for a reason

– to inspire, motivate and help other people,” Emilee said. “I still battle with my belief like every human being does. I cannot honestly tell you how prayer helps. Everybody was praying for me every day and little by little it started working. Somebody had to have helped me in this process, somebody bigger than me.”

Emilee is also acutely aware of – and extremely grateful for – the critical role Wings of Hope played in her recovery.

“If I hadn't received the right treatment, I might not be here today,” Emilee said.

One other thing Emilee can do now is dance, which she did with her older sister Alaina at the Wings of Hope dinner auction gala in February. Jack was there to watch them. He may never forget the foggy, nasty day on which they met, but this

is the moment he'll always remember when volunteering as a pilot for MAT missions.

“It brings tears to your eyes,” Jack said. “You feel like what you're doing is worth the effort. It's pretty rewarding.”

Interested in getting involved with charitable flying? To find an organization, check out Air Care Alliance's director of organizations at: www.aircarealliance.org/directory-groups



Dan Kukla is an award-winning writer with work published by ESPN The Magazine, USA Today, Fox Sports and Bleacher Report during a decade of journalism experience. He currently works as a professional “writer guy” in the marketing department of Moneta, a wealth management firm ranked No. 4 in the nation for its combination of size and scale. Dan is the son of MMOPA member Don Kukla, who is also on the Wings of Hope Board of Directors.

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