

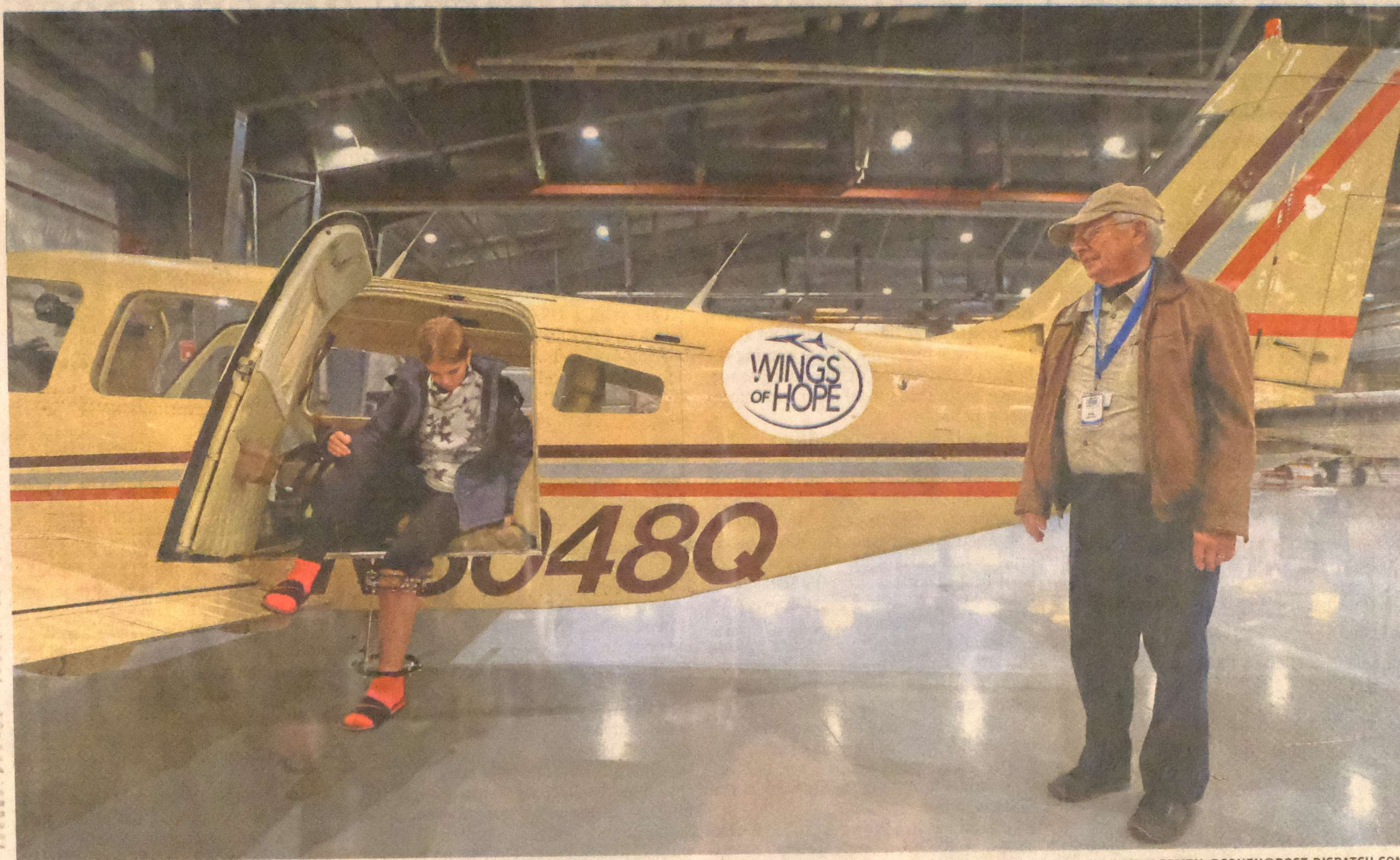


ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Thanks for Giving

THE VOLUNTEER WORK THAT MAKES ST. LOUIS BETTER



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Brooklyn Hutchison, 13, of Chanute, Kan., eases into her seat under the watch of Wings of Hope pilot Dr. Greg Kwasny as he prepares to fly her home on Friday. Brooklyn has had multiple surgeries on a broken leg at Shriners Hospitals for Children, using Wings of Hope four times.

BY LEAH THORSEN • ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

A mom of four turned her south St. Louis County basement into a giant clothes closet for foster kids. ¶ A man has lined up the Annie Malone May Day parade for three decades, and also spends his days encouraging African Americans to donate blood and speaking about the importance of early detection to fight prostate cancer. ¶ A retired doctor flies patients in need of medical care to and from hospitals through the Wings of Hope program, and a woman organizes a mentoring program pairing local women with women from other countries. ¶ They are four of the 49 people nominated this month as part of the Post-Dispatch's Thanks for Giving campaign, which recognizes local volunteers who give their time to help others. ¶ For a glimpse into the work they do to make St. Louis better, see **Page A4**



Storm Bell Schlafly

READ ABOUT THE 49 PEOPLE NOMINATED FOR MAKING THE REGION A BETTER PLACE. STLTODAY.COM/THANKSFORGIVING

THANKS FOR GIVING

FROM A1

LAURA STORM



LAURIE SKRIVAN, LSKRIVAN@POST-DISPATCH.COM

"I wanted to teach our kids how to serve, and that service is just more than one day of the year," said Laura Storm, who with the help of daughter Anna sorts through a toddler clothing bin on Nov. 20 in the basement of her home in south St. Louis County.

A group of moms from Faith Lutheran Church in Oakville founded the South County Foster Closet in March of last year.

The group takes donated items, mostly clothes and shoes, and packages them to give to foster kids.

"We felt like God was pushing us to do it. So we made a Facebook page and started doing it," said Laura Storm, a stay-at-home mother of four.

The closet is housed in her basement near Sunset Hills, on shelves loaded with bins. It got status as a nonprofit in January.

This year, the group has given clothes to 450 foster kids. Storm and her fellow volunteers aim to give each child 15 outfits, including four pairs of pajamas, seven pairs of socks, a pack of underwear or diapers, a coat, hat, two pairs of shoes and a book.

"People don't realize a lot of kids are coming into foster care with the clothes on their backs, and they don't have anything else," said Storm, 34. Many are coming in now with only summer clothes

and are in need of warmer clothing.

The group accepts all sizes of gently-used clothing and shoes, as well as baby gear such as bouncers and swings. Donations can be dropped off from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Wednesdays at Emerge Design Studio, 4344 Telegraph Road. Storm picks up the items and delivers to foster parents, too, as does another volunteer.

And she hopes to expand out of her basement. She dreams of a dedicated space that she can set up like a store, where foster families and children can choose items. It's especially hard to know what a teenager wants to wear, Storm said.

But there's no money to pay for such a space, which would have to be zoned for commercial use.

"I just keep hoping and praying that we can find a property for her," said Storm's mother, Rita Lautenschlager, who said her daughter always has been generous and kind. "She's just a giving, selfless person. It's never about her — it's about the kids she's helping."

DR. GREG KWASNY



ROBERT COHEN, RCOHEN@POST-DISPATCH.COM.

Greg Kwasny goes over a flight plan with Wings of Hope staff pilot Dick Horowitz, as they prepare to fly a patient back home to Chanute, Kan., on Friday. Kwasny volunteers his time flying patients in and out of St. Louis three or four times a month.

Dr. Greg Kwasny blames his wife for sparking his love of flying. She bought him an introductory flight lesson for their first wedding anniversary. He was 23 and in medical school, and he was hooked.

"I've been feeding the sickness ever since," said Kwasny, now a 74-year-old retired ophthalmologist.

About three years ago, he put that "sickness" to use by volunteering as a pilot for Wings of Hope, an aviation nonprofit founded by four St. Louis businessmen in 1962. The program provides free medical air-transport services to people who need specialized health care not available to them locally. Many are unable to fly on commercial flights. Volunteers also work in countries around the world, flying patients in remote areas to emergency medical care and taking doctors to areas without local health care.

Pilots must be multiengine rated and have a commercial pilot's license, with a minimum of 1,000 hours logged in a small aircraft. They fly planes owned by Wings of Hope out of the Spirit of St. Louis Airport.

The group makes roughly 200 medical air transport flights each year and has 20 volunteer pilots, said Carol Enright, its communication manager.

"We could never pay for the level of expertise they provide us," she said. The group estimates it would have had to pay pilots \$240,000 in wages this year, but instead can rely on volunteers.

Kwasny, of Chesterfield, logged 240 hours of flying around the country for the group last year, often bringing patients to Shriners Hospital in St. Louis, or wherever they need treatment.

He also volunteers as a clinical associate professor in St. Louis University's ophthalmology department once a week. He helps teach basic surgical skills to first-year residents by helping them practice in a lab, and also sees patients with the residents in a clinic while supervising their exam diagnosis and treatment plans.

And he's going to keep volunteering for as long as he can.

"Even if I didn't fly, I'd probably still be out there crawling under airplanes," Kwasny said.

That time will come next year when he turns 75, making him too old to fly for the program. He already helps the mechanics by tackling time-consuming tasks that don't need a mechanic's skill, such as removing a plane panel.

He says he has no plans to stop, even when grounded.